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SF & FANTASY STORIES
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NICK LOWE 25 YEARS OF MUTANT POPCORN

PLUS NEWS / BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

COLOUR ART WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE / BEN BALDWIN / RICHARD WAGNER / DARREN WINTER

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INTERFACE

FICTION

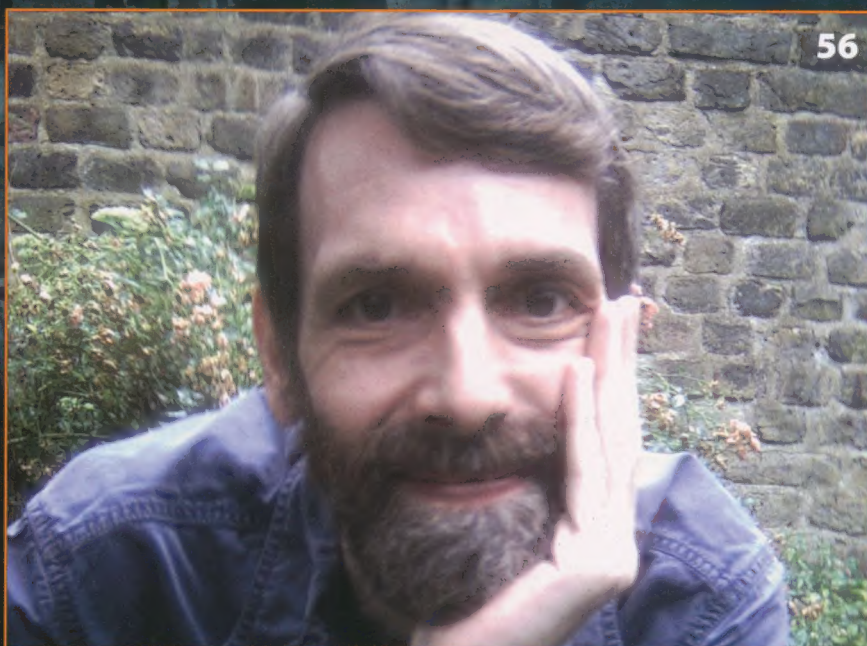
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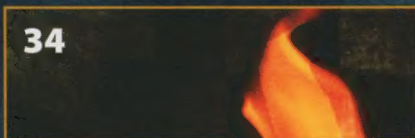
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EDITORIAL

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



This issue we celebrate the 25th anniversary of Nick Lowe's *Mutant Popcorn*, the first instalment of which appeared in #13, Autumn 1985 (left). Andy Robertson, one of

the *Interzone* team at the time, knew Nick quite well, admired his wit tremendously, and suggested that he contribute regular film reviews to the magazine. Twenty five years later Nick has finally picked up a long overdue British Science Fiction Award for *Mutant Popcorn* and made the shortlist for a British Fantasy Award in the same nonfiction category (results not known at the time of writing). Nick himself is slightly baffled by the sudden fuss. "I do a bimonthly film review column for *Interzone*. Nevertheless, it's a great magazine," he has said, with typical modesty and humour.

We've reprinted Nick's very first *Interzone* column in this issue, alongside the latest. Jonathan McCalmont has provided us with an excellent article on the history of *Mutant Popcorn* and interviews Nick ("Well, as long as it's only once every twenty five years," Nick said as we were arranging this interview, "but sure, anything to enhance the brilliance of the rest of the issue by contrast"), and we have testimonials from a few of his fellow film critics. Reading through all this confirms our belief that Nick Lowe is the best film critic around, and that *Interzone* is very, very lucky to have him.

Thanks Nick!

When you've finished with this issue, if you haven't done so already please take some time to read Nick's famous essay 'The Well-Tempered Plot Device' (as mentioned by Jonathan McCalmont) which Dave Langford still hosts on his Ansible website: news.ansible.co.uk/plotdev.html. Based on a 1982 convention speech and updated in 1986 it is still, as Dave says, "as funny and insightful as his film reviews."

If there's something you'd like to add to our appreciation of Nick Lowe please don't forget that you can do so on the forum (ttapress.com/forum), or email us and we'll happily pass it on.

The Perennial Booker Whinge. Andrew Motion explains that genre-tainted pariahs were *not* excluded from the 13-novel Booker Prize longlist. It was just a multiple happy coincidence that, across the board, they failed to be included. 'Motion said they had not consciously set out to exclude genre but stressed that the Man Booker prize was an award for literary fiction and there were plenty of prizes for crime and sci-fi.' (*Guardian*)

J.G. Ballard's private archives – including first drafts of fiction, from early unpublished stories to *Empire of the Sun* – were acquired by the British Library under the Acceptance in Lieu scheme, thus reducing the whopping tax bill following Ballard's death last year.

As Others See Us. On tie-dye clothing: 'It's Terry Pratchett books and Games Workshop. It's the implication that elsewhere in your wardrobe there may lurk a T-shirt that says "SMEG HEAD" and that, on occasion, when someone asks what you're having in the pub, you smirkingly ask for a Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster.' (*Guardian*)

George Pál, producer/director whose sf films include *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and Percy Greg – author of the utterly famous Mars novel *Across the Zodiac* (1880) – are commemorated in the latest naming of Martian craters: Pál (79km diameter) and Greg (68km).

Publishers & Sinners. Following public complaints from authors including Liz Williams, Night Shade Books apologised for years of missing royalty statements, unauthorised ebook editions and general unresponsiveness: 'We screwed up'. Hand-calculating royalties, for example, worked while publishing five books a years, but then it became 150... • Hachette Book Group's New York offices were closed 22–23 July for spraying of an alien infestation on three floors: bedbugs!

J.K. Rowling attained the *Forbes* list of dollar billionaires, though only just: equal 937th with a miserable \$1bn (estimated), thus sharing the ignominy of the bottom rung with 74 other strivers.

'I Never Drink...Communion Wine.' Anne Rice's public renunciation of Christianity – or rather, Catholicism – attracted much comment, especially on the point that it apparently took her twelve years to notice that the Catholic hierarchy is not that liberal about things like feminism, birth control or gay rights.

Awards. *Brit Writers*, published author category: Terry Pratchett, *Nation*. • *Carnegie Medal* (children's fiction): Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*. • *Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery* (unsung authors): Mark Clifton. • *David Gemmell Legend* (heroic fantasy novel): Graham McNeill, *Empire: The Legend of Sigmar*. Newcomer: Pierre Pevel, *The Cardinal's Blades*. • *Eaton* (sf life achievement): 2010 Samuel R. Delany; 2011 Harlan Ellison. • *John W. Campbell Memorial*: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*. • *Prometheus* (libertarian): Dani and Eytan Kollin, *The Unincorporated Man*. • *Sidewise* (alternate history). Novel: Robert Conroy, 1942. Short: Alastair Reynolds, 'The Fixation' (*Solaris Book of New SF* 3).

Michael Moorcock on his vast new nonfiction collection *Into the Media Web*, ed. John Davey: 'Some early embarrassments in there! I didn't see it until it appeared in print and probably wouldn't have chosen everything John chose. Also, I've had to employ a sturdy boy to carry it around and hold it for me on his back when I want to read it. [...] The least Savoy could have done for the older reader would have been to include a free wheelbarrow with every copy.'

Sir Ian Blair, ex-Metropolitan Police commissioner, showed off his sf erudition regarding the number of UK police forces: 'It's 43, which is, by coincidence, the secret of the universe in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*...'

Frank Frazetta's famous 1971 painting for *Conan the Destroyer* was sold for \$1.5 million at the San Diego Comic Convention in July.

We Are Everywhere. Only an sf simile could do justice to World Cup background noise: 'Though insufferable to any foreigner, the vuvuzela is a piece



> Your columnist before being ravaged by 30-odd years of SF journalism

of hardware to which the entire South African nation appears to have developed aural immunity – a bit like Omega IV, the planet in *Star Trek* where all the indigenous population is immune to the deadly virus in its biosphere, but a 400-strong exploratory Federation party immediately snuff it.’ (*Guardian*)

Neil Gaiman on the current sparkly-vampire glut: ‘My next big novel was going to have a vampire. Now, I’m probably not. They are everywhere, they’re like cockroaches.’ (*Independent*)

Magazine Scene. The 200th issue of *SFX*, dated October 2010, appeared on 25 August. Am I the only contributor to have been in all 200?

It Is Written. Sign in Waterstone’s while stock was being rearranged: ‘Science Fiction and Fantasy are now separated / This is Science Fiction’. (They have since been reunited.)

As Others See Us II. Why it’s important to preserve one’s ignorance about geeky things such as web browsers: ‘...as soon

as you know something like that it pushes out something important, and before you know it you’re painting little figurines from *The Lord of the Rings*.’ (*The IT Crowd*, Channel 4)

Thog’s Masterclass. *Strange Pleasures Dept.* ‘Half-heartedly, he unhinged the hand already soldered to his rigid member.’ (Maurice G. Dantec, *Babylon Babies*, 1999; trans Noura Wedell 2005) • *Eyeballs in the Haberdashery.* ‘Detective O’Conner’s voice was a nasal bleat. His eyes bulged under the brim of his soft felt hat.’ (Paul Chadwick, ‘Doctor Zero’, *Ten Detective Aces*, 1933) • *Naughty Parts Dept.* ‘Still growling, Katov took a small tool from his groin pouch and dropped to his knees...’ *Later:* ‘Penway longed for the tool Katov had carried in his groin pouch. Perhaps it would have sufficed.’ (Paul W. Fairman, *I, The Machine*, 1968) • *Dept of Speech Therapy.* ‘“Please forgive my voice, Denny,” his hoarse whisper came at last. “But once in the dungeon, when I was nearly dead with thirst and begging for anything to drink, Sorainya had molten metal poured down my throat.”’ (Jack Williamson, *The Legion of Time*, 1938) • *Deep Throat Dept.*

‘She felt a scream curling somewhere down in her stomach, growing as it wormed its sick way around and around, working its way up her throat...’ (Tony Ballantyne, *Divergence*, 2007) • *Dept of True Romance.* ‘And so it was, with full belly and empty bladder, Fred plowed into Mary like a moose through a windshield.’ (David Marusek, *Mind Over Ship*, 2009)

R.I.P.

Stephen Gilbert (1912–2010), Irish author of four novels with fantastic elements – the best-known being *Ratman’s Notebooks* (1968, reissued and filmed as *Willard*) – died on 23 June aged 97. He is often confused with Gilbert Ralston (1912–1999, also born in Co. Down), who wrote the *Willard* screenplay.

James P. Hogan (1941–2010), UK-born writer of mostly hard sf who began publishing with *Inherit the Stars* (1977), died on or before 12 July; he was 69. [GVG] Other enjoyable sf novels include *Voyage from Yesteryear* (1982) and *Code of the Lifemaker* (1983).


Frank K. Kelly (1914–2010), US writer whose ten sf stories (three collected as *Starship Invincible*, 1979) appeared in US magazines 1931–1935, died on 11 June – one day short of his 96th birthday.

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre (?1948/9–2010), Scots-born author, journalist and illustrator whose sf novel is *The Woman Between the Worlds* (1994), died in a ‘suspicious’ fire at his Brooklyn apartment on 25 June. He suffered from depression and had issued various farewells; the official view is suicide.

Patricia Neal (1926–2010), Oscar-winning US actress who spoke the famous words ‘Klaatu barada nikto’ in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), died on 8 August. She was 84, married to Roald Dahl 1953–1983; further genre films were *Stranger from Venus* (1954) and *Ghost Story* (1981).

José Saramago (1922–2010), Portuguese novelist and 1998 Nobel laureate who frequently used sf/fantasy themes – such as the epidemic of blindness in his novel *Blindness* (1995, trans 1997) – died on 18 June aged 87.





LOVE AND WAR

by **TIM LEES**

PART ONE: ARRANGEMENTS

"YOUR PAPERS," HE SAYS, AND THE ROOM SHRINKS DOWN AROUND ME. "It seems there's a...discrepancy."

He perches on the desk-edge. His nose juts and his head bobs up and down. He's like some big, unpleasant, scruffy bird – a vulture or a marabou stork, perhaps.

He licks his lips.

"I've got a friend," he says at last. "A...well, acquaintance." His hands are knotted in his lap. "It may be I could talk to him? On your behalf? If we could come to some sort of...arrangement, say? Between ourselves?"

He glances at the door.

"Arrangement, yes? You understand?"

And then, in case I haven't got it yet, he reaches out and palps my left breast like a bath-sponge.

And so it is, during the second year of war, I start my life with Derek Measdon: research consultant, Party member, one-time lecturer and full-time creep.

I giggle, nervously.

He scares me half to death.

"UGLY BUGGERS, DON'T you think?"

Our captives huddle in their cage, all spider-limbs and lemur-eyes, their mouthparts twitching. Every effort to communicate has failed. They can't, or won't, learn words. Our sign language – originally devised for chimps – brings no response. They twitter to themselves like grasshoppers, or utter long, low, nasal whoops, prompting some of us to speculate that their resemblance to humanity is, in fact, just that: resemblance, nothing more. Convenient, if true.

Derek plays tour guide. A dozen guests check through Security. All male, the youngest barely out of college, the oldest sixty-odd, sporting a thin, grey, military moustache. The others all defer to him. Few, if any, will have seen the enemy so close before. They bunch together, awkward and uncertain what to do. Faced with the spoils of war, they're oddly diffident, even a bit embarrassed. This – the cage, the lab, the workshops – it's not a side of things they care to think about.

"Don't worry," Derek chides. "They can't get out."

He smiles. He rubs his hands. He stalks across the floor, using the space as he must once have used the lecture hall, twisting his skinny body, throwing out his arms to emphasise his message (he confided in me that he'd always hoped he might be talent-spotted for TV, given a science show to host; nothing came of it, of course).

"My friends." He beams at them. (They're not his friends. They're Party members like himself, though higher in the pecking order: officers, administrators, new boys on the rise.) "Don't let the quiet fool you. This is war, and we are standing, at this very moment, on the front line. Make no mistake about it – here," he gestures to himself, "are we. And there," the cage, "Earth X."

He's quite impressive. I'd no idea how good a speaker he could be. He courts them, flatters them. Amuses them. But always puts his case.

"There have been questions raised. I'm well aware of it. Our methods are too harsh, they say, our plans too radical, our measures too extreme." (The word used, I recall, was not "extreme" but "brutal.") Now one by one he eyes his guests, each in turn. "Well. I'll tell our critics what I'm telling you tonight. And I say this: let's have some realism, gentlemen! Let's face the facts!" His voice lifts, stirring. Behind, the captives chitter, shift, unsettled by the noise. "Who, I ask, can win a war by being *nice*? Because it *is* a war, regardless what the liberals say. And not just any war. We've got a world at stake here. Not simply our lives, our homes, our families. A *world*. If the Convention says soft pedal, then I say: can we afford to listen? Can we? Can we take the word of cushioned, over-funded bureaucrats, while everything around us is visibly – *visibly* going to hell? Can we afford, in short, to die?"

A tall, judicial-looking man speaks from the crowd.

"The Convention," he remarks, "must be accounted to."

"I agree – the Convention is binding. Binding in every sense." Derek looks the tall man up and down, and then, as if dismissing him, turns to the others. "The Convention binds our hands! It muzzles us! I don't reject it – no need. The Convention," he

repeats, with just a hint of mockery, "is irrelevant. And I will tell you now: hold to its precepts, and we, too, will be irrelevant. The fact will be recorded on our tombs – if there's anybody left knows how to write by then."

Laughter. Uncomfortable laughter. And the tall man tells him, "We're not Nazis."

"Certainly not!" Derek jumps to take offence. He looks towards the man with the moustache, who nods him on. "Our backs are to the wall," he says. "We need to make decisions, and we need to make them fast."

There's tension here. The power's shifting: it's Derek who commands the floor, this upstart from a third-rate university. I watch their faces, some resentful, grudging, others interested, perhaps even admiring. Then I tidy up my papers, slip out to the exit for a break. I've still got cigarettes – a privilege of government – and light up, sucking deep. The street's blacked out. It isn't air raids we're afraid of, though. Not bombers. This is something much more terrible, and more insidious...and probably already here.

YOU FEEL IT on your skin some nights, or taste it, like a scent borne on the wind from far away; a germ, a virus, a contagion... Brought here from the world we call Earth X.

I know that smell. The jumblies have it, for a start. (That's what we call them, unofficially, our captives; the jumblies, poor old things, who went to sea in a sieve, and got what they deserved.) A methane smell, a swamp smell, stinking, and yet sweet and spicy too – nutmeg, cinnamon...a sickly smell, sometimes. It rises from their cage like body odour. Or you catch it on the street, the reek of Earth X, and seconds later see something you can't quite place – a rat, perhaps, just wriggling down a sewer grate, and gone before you've chance to see it properly. A rat? An ordinary rat? Or something else? You sniff the air. You wait. That sense of violation, worlds colliding... Nowhere safe.

Derek's polite, most of the time. He's good to me. When he gets angry or frustrated, he'll stamp his feet and swear. He likes to work during the first part of the day. Only when he feels that he's achieved something – I'm seldom sure of what – or needs distraction, then he turns to me. The act itself is mercifully short. It's no distress. Long past, and in another land, a friend said, "There's no time for love in war." Yet as he pants himself to orgasm, his hands are on my face, his lips kissing my cheeks, my mouth... And afterwards, he asks me, "Did you like that? Did you? Did you?" "Mmm," I say, as if I've just eaten a chocolate. I reach out for a towel. "And do you like me?" So I turn to him, this thin, unhappy man, middle-aged but suddenly reduced to an uncertain child, and I wonder what it was that damaged him so badly (for he has been damaged, I'm convinced, in some way he can never speak about or openly admit, not even to himself), and then of course I tell him yes, and when he wants a little more I tell him I was scared of him at first (which pleases him), but now I've come to realise how kind he is, how generous, how



loving, and so on (which pleases him still more).

I fasten up my bra.

"I thought," he says, "as we've been getting on so well...that we could work more closely? I know your papers aren't quite right," he carefully reminds me, "but I could make a case... I have to travel sometimes. I could do with an assistant. A...well, companion."

I tell him this sounds wonderful. I watch him try to hide his smile. He pulls his trousers up, almost tripping as he does. He takes his glasses from the desktop. Then he stops hiding the smile. He grins at me, full strength. It's not the most appealing sight. I manage to grin back.

He has no wife, no children. No other women in his life. If he has friends, real friends, he never speaks of them.

Earth X must be the best thing that ever happened to him. In times of peace, he was a nobody, a minor academic, re-hashing science to a bunch of bored and boring students; but in war, he's turned into an operator, guided by some instinct to befriend the powerful, the prominent, to creep and flatter; no wonder that he pores over reports, re-reads statistics with a glee that any other man would find absurd.

"Look," he cries, waving the papers at me. "Outbreaks! Outbreaks! Here – and here – and here!"

It's a fairground ride, a thrill for him. He can't imagine it will ever end.

PART TWO: THE JOB

WE FLY OUT TO A CRISIS ZONE THAT'S opened in Northumbria, a journey shadowed by publicity (much of which I've helped to orchestrate; nothing is ever what it seems). Now I'm his PA. The role today is decorative; not so much a trophy wife, more like a high-powered laptop or the latest mobile phone. PAs aren't people, they're outgrowths of their masters, meant to carry through their masters' whims, their wills, to satisfy their egos' dreams. (Even the Ray-bans he insists I wear make me machine-like, distant and indomitable.) I accept all this. I've taken on the role. I'm a professional. It's going to go just fine, I tell myself, provided I'm not actually called upon to do much.

And there are perks, as well. I wear a trenchcoat bought from Party funds, a pencil skirt, a pink silk blouse, the kind of clothes I haven't seen in years. I catch myself, sometimes, reflected in a window, and wonder who this elegant, important lady is.

Derek, too, plays dress-up. This morning he's the man of action, in flak jacket and combat pants. He poses for photographers, talks loudly to the military. "Can you take us in?" There's consultation, and the answer, it appears, is yes.

"Alright. We'll go."

"We," I realise, means himself, the TV journalist, currently trying to phone his wife (the signal keeps on cutting out), the camera/sound man, copter crew...and me.

I'm far from pleased. I can see outlines of the nearer buildings, shimmering like smoke. The light's disturbed. It ripples, twists, responding to whatever currents waft across the rift between dimensions. Derek, feigning cool, dictates a memo, a

detailed and half-accurate account of how he has been forced to take command, simply to judge the scale of the intrusion. "No-one was doing anything," he enunciates, already in the past tense. "I had to shake them up a bit." He plans to publish, once it's over. And he's grown powerful of late. Even the witnesses won't contradict.

One snag: the journalist won't come. He tells us we can do the piece from here, as easily as in the zone. Derek pins him down at once, pointing his finger like a gun. "You're scared."

"I've got a wife and kid."

"Scared."

"Not what was planned, this. No insurance, no protection, no –"

"I'm Derek Measdon. That's all the damn insurance you should need."

His ego's working overtime. He's stern, commanding. He beckons to the cameraman. "You in?" he asks him, man to man. The cameraman, lanky and vague, just shrugs. Then takes his gear and follows us.

I've never been up in a helicopter. I sit right at the back, so can't see much, which might be just as well. It makes my stomach jump when we take off. Like leaving half myself behind. I giggle and my hands clench on the seat corners.

The cameraman shoots through the open door. Derek barks instructions. "There – there! Get those buildings in, and where the road goes up, just there. See? There!"

The cameraman says nothing, filming all the while. He's got the air of someone used to being told his job by know-nothings.

The journey's short, just fifteen minutes. I'm getting used to it when we begin to drop. Little thrills of panic, all over again. Falling, falling. And we're down. A jerk, a jolt. Unclip my harness, chase the others, climb out.

There are houses. I'm surprised. I'd understood Earth X would simply overwrite the world, like a rogue computer programme, but that isn't how it works. Instead it warps it, changes it. The town looks like a battlefield. Houses shattered. Walls like broken teeth. And yet again that flavour in the air, sharper now, both sweet and rotten. It makes me want to gag. I glance at Derek for support. His face is drawn. The place disturbs him, and he hides his fear with action.

"Alright lads! Alright! Form a perimeter!"

But the military take orders from their CO, who deploys them, quietly, marking out a spot for each; doing, effectively, what Derek asked.

"Mirror," says Derek, and I hold up a small make-up mirror while he carefully adjusts a borrowed beret, tilting it just so. He licks his fingers, plasters down a lock of hair that curls under the brim. He slaps his cheeks to get the colour back. He wipes his mouth and turns to camera.

"I am standing – I am standing in the ruins of what, till last week, was a thriving English market town. Over here –" he gestures – "was the High Street. You can still make out the shop signs. But the arrival of an alien force – a force inimical to our existence – an incursion of –"



He's still trying to get it right when we see them. It's like they come from nowhere. First a solitary figure, flickering between the buildings, half-seen, then another, and a third. Pale and thin. Then more, and more. Twenty. Thirty. I back up, slam into the chopper hull. It's happening too fast. No time to feel afraid. That's going to hit me later, when I wake up sweating in the night, reach for the light and find the power's gone again. But now, there's nothing – just the need to run, and get away.

"Fire!" shouts Derek. "Fire, fire!"

The soldiers wait. The figures sprint in, circling us, surrounding us. They're different from the jumbies in the cage; wilder, fiercely active. The officer shouts out. A volley in the air. The creatures pause, back off. But only for a second. Someone grabs me from behind and pulls me up into the cabin. Blades turn. Roaring, rushing, everybody shouting. Then we lurch into the air. Derek slumps across me. We're none of us strapped in. We grab at seat backs, harnesses, each other. "See that?" he says. "See that? We were attacked. Attacked, that's what!"

The cameraman's been filming all the while. He's good. I'll watch that film a hundred times, listen to a dozen different analysts, take their notes and type them up. But most of all, there's a shot quite near the end. The camera's shaky and the picture half-observed by someone's shoulder. We're looking down. And as we rise, the motions of the crowd below take on a curious, inhuman beauty, a pattern, almost like a dance, the figures winding in and out like shapes in a kaleidoscope. "They're swarming," I say then. "Like fish, or birds..."

"We went in," Derek tells the press. His voice is hoarse and strained. "First there was nothing. Nobody about. And then, in seconds, *literally* seconds, hundreds of them. They seemed to come out of the air..."

Alone, I ask him, "Say they weren't attacking, though? Say it was...something else?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Trying to get out, maybe. The same as us."

He *hmphs* and clicks his tongue. "Oh no," he mutters. "Not the same as us. Oh no no no."

The town suffers a tactical localised strike, the first in the campaign.

No-one will say whether the strike is nuclear or not.

THINGS CHANGE WITHIN the Party. Derek's boss, an old-guard type with bloodhound jowls, faces a disciplinary court, charged with "verbal indiscretion," "negative pronouncements" and "indecentcy" (a drunken late-night talk with someone he believed to be a friend). His shoes are barely cold as Derek slips them on. We celebrate with ten minutes of wheezing sex, a half bottle of brandy (good alcohol rarer than cigs these days) and twenty minutes' further inconclusive fumbling, after which he asks me if I'll marry him. Later he apologises, saying he was just excited by promotion, and I shouldn't take him seriously. Nonetheless, I try to indicate I may, given encouragement, agree. Meanwhile I keep a bag packed underneath my bed, ready for off. His moods

can change, my status with them.

"RINNINGTON IN ROOM 3 has a theory."

We're dining at the Midway, one of the few remaining restaurants. There's no official policy, but clientele are now almost without exception Party members. Who else can afford it? Or dodge the curfew? Derek sips his ice water. He's scarcely touched his steak, while mine is almost gone, no matter how slowly I try to eat.

"He doesn't think they're from Earth X. Not native, anyway. The other fauna's all too primitive. True, eh? Different levels altogether. Must admit, I'd worked that out myself. But his idea – well, it's ingenious, I'll give him that. He thinks they're basically some sort of by-product. Spontaneously generated, born out of the friction when the two worlds intersect. Like sparks, he said. Like little sparks of life."

I chew. I'm not sure he's aware how starved I am. I take a forkful of potato, count to ten before I lift it to my mouth. I don't want him to see my hunger, don't want another weapon he can use.

"Well," I say, "that's what you're after, isn't it? Not human, the Convention won't apply." I force myself to look into his eyes, and smile. "Bingo," I say.

"Bingo." He sucks his lower lip. I wonder if he's looking for advice, or someone to confide in. Am I, then, the great woman behind the greater man? I cut another corner off my steak, a tiny piece, a morsel. "Go on," I say, and pop it in my mouth. I don't even start chewing right away, just press it with my tongue, squeezing the juices out, parting the soft, moist fibres till I almost drool onto the tabletop.

Perhaps he thinks it's all for him, this ecstasy. As if I'm hanging on his every word.

"There's... Yes, I understand the plus points.

Useful, very useful." He drums his fingers on the tabletop. "But there's a downside, too. Bit awkward, really..."

My mouth's too busy to say anything. I offer him a puzzled look.

"Rinnington's lot, you see, they've got this thing for morphic resonance. Daft idea, unscientific, but... Well. The way they put it, it's like the universe is *built* for making people. Or, not *built* exactly, but, well. That's what it does. Sentient beings. Like us."

"Mm-hm."

"In *their* view, this is just the latest of a string of visitations, one after the other, from a string of other Earths. You can mark them in geology. Mass extinctions, climate change, seas dried up. The dinosaurs. All that. Evolutionary leaps – new species suddenly appearing without prior record. Ice ages. Apparently it's all in there. They say."

I nod between chews. "Very plausible. Mm."

"Oh, no doubt. But then we get to...recent times." He frowns. I frown in sympathy. "The rise of man. The missing link... Where did we come from, eh? Rinnington's lot, they think – they actually believe we're part of this – this *thing* of theirs. The by-product of one of these – dimensional mix-ups. That's why



the fossils don't make sense. Apes, hominid-types...then suddenly, here's modern man. Birds, he's trying to make the same case. Birds, you know?"

"OK," I say.

"You're happy with that?"

"I'm not...unhappy."

"Ah." He taps his mouth with one hard-bitten knuckle. "Ah. Ah."

Another group comes in. They nod to Derek. He nods back, falls silent. The waiters are discreet enough to seat them far from us.

He says, "I'm telling you in confidence, of course."

"Of course."

I eye his steak, still practically untouched. I, too, remember how it felt to waste good food. I wonder, when we leave, if I could slip it in my bag? Or ask him for it, outright?

"So," I say. "So what's the problem?"

"You don't see it? I mean, besides the fact it's all complete and utter bunkum anyway? And the missing link's a myth? Besides all that?"

"Tell me."

"Well. Hm. If we're all spawned by the same damn process – we're the same in origin. It's obvious. We lose our whole moral authority. They're us, we're them. Extermination's not an option any more. Not without a great deal of explaining, anyway. And somebody'll pick it up. Some grubby little media hack. Use it against me. Against," he stops, corrects himself, "against the Party."

"I don't see why."

"I've got my enemies. You can't know what it's like."

"That isn't what I meant."

He looks at me and tilts his head, a puppy dog.

"You're Rinnington's superior," I say. "He's got to go through you. What happens then...whether you pass it on..."

But of course he's thought this through a long time back, and reached the same conclusions. What he wants now is somebody to ratify his plans, to justify him, back him up, absorb the blame.

"Ethically," he says, "I'd be obliged..."

His voice trails off. I squeeze his hand. "Your job," I tell him, "is to win the war. Whatever cost. Whatever sacrifice you have to make."

It's like he doesn't even recognise his own speech, echoed back to him. He tells me, "We're not Nazis."

"No, we're not. And nobody could ever, ever say you were. Not ever."

And he smiles. And it's clear to both of us exactly what he plans to do.

Later, I'm heading for the ladies. I pass the other group, discussing meetings and committees. I can feel them watch me as I pass. Measdon's bit of fluff; I've heard the names. But I'm thinking of the untouched steak on Derek's plate. I lock myself into a cubicle. I hang my bag over the hook. Turn, look down. And

step away so fast I smash into the plywood wall, and the whole room rattles like a drum.

There's something in the toilet bowl. Coiled up, filling it. It stirs a little, maybe with the noise, or with the movement in the air.

It's a large grey worm, a roundworm, thick as my wrist. It stretches lazily, almost a shrug, the water slopping on its skin, which has the look of smooth, grey putty. There's a sweet, sick smell. Its blind head rises swaying from the toilet bowl and sniffs the air.

I'm fighting with the lock. It takes too long. The metal slips and slides out of my hands. Then I'm through, and out the door, and running. Past the Party members. Past the waiter, lifting his hand to stop me or perhaps protect himself. I don't see Derek. I'm on the street then, retching, vomiting. That so-expensive steak comes back up, burning in my mouth. I'm sick and flecks of vomit splash my tights, my final pair of tights, and I could weep. Derek arrives, hovering awkwardly. He puts his hands on me. I shake him off. Then, remembering how I depend on him, I lean back, shuddering in his embrace. He keeps on asking me what's wrong. I can't say. I point, I mumble. Next thing

he's on the phone to somebody. I lean against a parked car. In my mind's eye I can see the worm, squiggling through the restaurant door, pursuing me. I stand up. Derek comes across. "Let's go," he says. "I'll drive you home."

Next morning, when I pass by on the public bus, the whole place – not just the restaurant, but the entire block – has been taped off. There are biohazard signs, and grey foam crusted on the windows and the doorways. It's all been disinfected. No-one will eat there any more.

"I SAID I was alone," he tells me, as I'm sorting through the papers in the clinic room.

"Ashamed of me," I say, trying to hide how bad I feel.

"No – no. But I'm concerned – you should be spared the...trouble. Earth X infects the mind, as well, you know. I wouldn't like to think what some people would make of, of –"

"What happened to the waiters? The nice one with the glasses? Where's he now?"

"Oh, they'll be fine, I'm sure. Don't worry about them."

He puts his hands upon my shoulders, squeezing the flesh, a move he thinks I like. I'm cold. I'm cold as if I've just been dipped in ice. In an hour, at break time, I'll submit to him as usual, and moan the way he wants me to, and think about the poor man with the glasses, and wonder if he had a family, a wife and kids. And wonder who he was.

WE GET MOSQUITOES, vile things, two foot long or more. I'm hiding with the troops – technically "liaising" – and we watch them drop onto a field of cattle just as dusk comes down. They drink. Their guts colour with blood, visible through thin, translucent shells. Their bodies wag and pulse. We watch, and wait. As night falls they begin to glow like fireflies. A hundred squirming little neon tubes, they rise into the air, perform some weird, circling



ritual, and then the CO calls out, "Fire!" I put my earmuffs on. It's weird, watching them blink out one by one. Like shooting down the stars.

Beautiful and terrible, you don't forget such nights. They put their mark on you. They don't let go.

The cattle are infected. Slaughtered, burned. That's law. But everybody knows that half the meat will end up on a butcher's slab, with bogus Health Department stamps, this lovely, bloodless beef. Derek's steak no longer seems so tempting. The penalty for dealing in such goods is death, of course, which doesn't deter anyone. Death is now the penalty for many things: for looting, trafficking, purveying stolen property, hoarding petrol, travelling without the proper papers, neglecting to report intrusions, filing false reports, and hindering or otherwise impairing or in some way failing to support the lawful government in dealing with said outbreaks, so on and so forth.

The Party has become the Warrior, the Spirit of the Earth. Or so the latest posters tell us. *Fighting for everyone. For you, for me, for one and all...*

This is my final cigarette. I thought I'd smoke it somewhere special, like the airport where I first saw England, or the house I lived in just before the war, when all I had to care about was rent and boyfriends and my job, and no-one even knew about Earth X. But travel is impossible, except with Derek, so I huddle by the bins outside the offices and smoke it to the filter in just minutes and go back to work.

THE JUMBLIES ARE no longer classed as sapient. New tests, especially devised, demote them down the evolutionary tree, below ourselves, below the apes, the monkeys, down and down and lower still. Their cries are the equivalent of bird song, we're now told: signs of territory and mating status. My own analysis of them as swarming creatures reappears, now credited to others. Nor does it hold the implications which were clear to me: that feeling of community, of tribe or family together, moving with a single aim. Oh no. Today it's all blind instinct, nothing more. (And what, I wonder, would we make of our own actions at the time? Running, panicking, scrambling over one another, trying to get away? Nobody's fool enough to ask.)

Derek's on the phone all afternoon. He can't contain himself. This is the breakthrough he's been waiting for. *Carte blanche*. Within a day, the creatures lose all rights, all claim to civilized response. We can win this war, he says. We can win by any means we choose. He looks so happy that I wonder if he's going to ask me to marry him again.

DISSECTION. THE SPECIMEN is large, mature, and was, so we've been told, "humanely killed" – gassed, I think – itself rather a novelty. There was doubt that it would actually die. The corpse is spread upon the table. Its head is tilted back, lips slightly parted, giving it a startled look, as if it had expected something different. External genitals are hidden in a fold of fatty skin, but the creature is believed to be a male.

We all crane forward, eagerly.

The scalpel draws a thin dark line along the chest. The skin is slowly peeled away. It wrinkles round the wound, unwrapping like an ancient sweater.

It's easier to watch, the further it proceeds. The creature changes, ceases to be almost human, becoming meat. Successive veils are pulled aside. The web of veins, the harness of the muscles, the arched cathedral of the ribs. The surgeon lifts the entrails out into the light. The corpse suddenly shivers. It jerks. Its arms flail and it sits up, flayed face turning quickly left and right.

Alarms shriek. Soldiers rush into the room. They push me backwards.

I hear gunshots, over and over. They deafen me. I've got my hands pressed to my face, my ears.

Later, someone turns off the alarm. I still can't hear a thing.

"THEY'RE VERY...SIMPLE sorts of animals," Derek speaks on TV news, picking his words with care. He looks relaxed, authoritative. Trustworthy. "At first we were confused by their resemblance to the higher apes, but I'm afraid that's just coincidence. And quite...misleading." He shows some still shots of the jumbies, moments caught when their expressions seem, to human eyes, moronic, dull and empty. "Semblance of this type is common in the insect world," he remarks, implying far more than he says. "A stick insect, a grasshopper that imitates a leaf, or a fly striped like a wasp. These creatures are no higher than the other xenofoms we've found. Earth X is primitive, a world still in formation. I can say this categorically. We need have no more conscience about dealing with it than – oh, an ordinary householder would have in dealing with a hornets' nest."

"So," I TELL him. "Not spontaneously generated, then."

"Rinnington's idea, not mine." He doesn't look at me.

"Rinnington's idea not good enough."

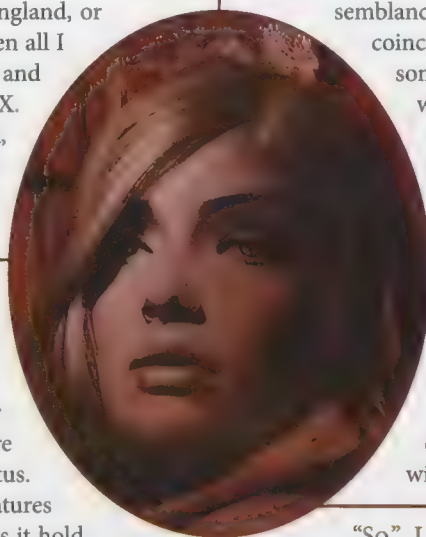
"We've got analysis. We've got the clearance. We've got all we need."

"They're people, Der."

"You've changed your tune. And anyway, they're not. I have it on official paper. They are not."

He hesitates a moment, turns to me. "Just don't get fond of them, that's all. They're going to go. Every last one. And if you can't get used to that, then..." He lets me fill the rest in for myself. It's not too hard.

THERE ARE OTHER women in his life now. No more the awkward, nervous little creature he once was. Today he's special. He's somebody. I see him less and less. At first I – miss him? Worry, anyway, that as his ardour for me fades, he'll cast me off, a cumbersome, embarrassing reminder of his past. I try to please. I stroke his thinning hair. His poor, bare, freckled scalp. He never talks about my papers any more. I don't know if that's



bad or good. He sits on government committees, leaves meetings for a blow-job to relieve the stress. And one day, soon after I arrive at work, he tells me, "Harcourt upstairs was asking for some help. I thought you might enjoy the change. Just for a few weeks, hm?"

I am transferred.

HARCOURT, A WEASEL of a man, hunches at his desk. His eyes undress me. No doubt I've been sent up here as a gift, a bag of sweets passed round at Christmas time. It's probably been carefully explained just what I'll do, if not exactly why.

I wait for him to make his move.

CAUTERISATION. THEY NOW believe Earth X can only penetrate our world at certain points, places where the fabric that divides us is in some way weakened. Take out those points, they say, take out the danger. So with each incursion crushed, a seal is formed between our world and theirs. A scab, in fact. Cauterised land is marked as safe for re-use. Since all its former tenants are, by nature, gone, the land reverts to government. Tenders are invited for its purchase. Party members only. Call the special line. Subject to security and credit checks. Void where prohibited.

It's LATE. I'M on my own. Revisiting. I key the lock. Open the door. They hear me coming, chirrup softly in the dark. I put the light on and they shuffle to the bars.

They know me. They remember me. They're thin and ill-looking. Their odour's sickly-sweet. I hold my breath, move closer, closer...

There's a tall one, nearly my height. He pushes to the front. The flesh around his mouth is puckered, like it's dried out, wrinkling. He tips his head to one side, watching me. Lips purse and flutter. And he does something. He reaches through the bars and touches me – he rubs his finger on my forehead. It's like a small glass marble being rolled around my brow. Soothing. Relaxing. I shut my eyes. The pictures come immediately. I'm startled, but I don't open my eyes. He makes a tiny, cooing sound, as if to reassure me, tell me this is how it's meant to be. I breathe, I sigh. I watch the white mist rising on a river, and the sparkle of an insect's wing... Gigantic trees on either bank. They must be thousands of years old. Each one clustered with great globular cocoons, knobbly, white-grey things like wasps' nests; and the jumbles crawl all over them, peep from entranceways, scuttle like tight-rope walkers back and forth, from one pod to the next... I don't analyse, don't think. Not while I'm watching it. It's later that I realise it's a city. A city, stretching mile on mile, tree on tree... Their city. And their home.

We rise, we fall. Like wind upon the river, air into the lungs. We rise, we fall.

I don't hear words. Only in memory I make them into words. At first, they're feelings, thoughts, perceptions of the world. Innate knowledge.

Rising, falling. Tides and currents. On and on.

The jumbles move like acrobats. Like dancers. So much grace, so much poise, unseen in any of our prisoners. They meet, they talk. Hundreds of feet above the ground, they live their lives. Bright spears of sun cut through the foliage, each shaft alive with tiny creatures, wings of glitter, swirling in the light. The roar of water. Everything moving, everything in flood. And far off, something else. Something that pulls me, draws me to it.

For a moment, in that water world, I think that it's a shipwreck. Broken masts, the ruptured hull, the rigging cut and tangled... But it's not a shipwreck. The mast's a tall steel ladder, jutting up into the air, the hull a mass of tumbled brickwork, the rigging cables, power lines... There's a metal girder jammed into the branches of a tree. And what look like blossoms, drifting on the water here, turn out to be papers – invoices and tickets and reports come loose from bindings, a whole flotilla of bureaucracy, scattered and shining in the sun...

The air is wrong. The taste of it, the feel of it. My chest's so tight that I can hardly breathe. I want to wake up, want to force my eyes open, but I've forgotten how.

This kills us, says the jumble in my head.

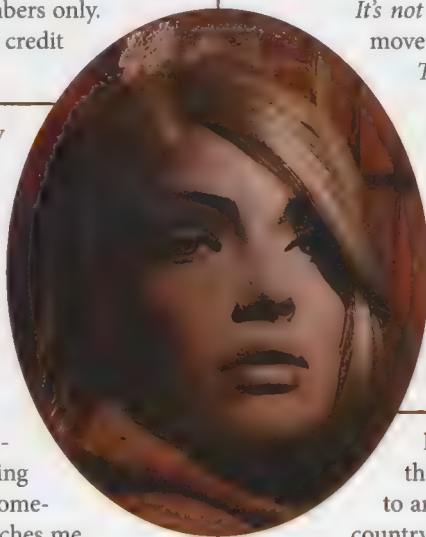
It's not our fault, I try to say, and, *we're hurt too.* I move my lips. No sound comes out.

This kills us.

I step back. And I'm at the cage again. The jumble's hand is up, his finger out, and then it drops, falls to his side. His eyes show no more interest in me, no recognition, no intelligence. I can hear Derek's voice say *primitive* and *stupid*. I look at them. The tall one in particular.

"We don't want it," I say. "We don't."

They huddle there, sick-looking and feeble, and I'm not sure that they even hear.



I READ REPORTS. I read the target lists. I read the figures for acceptable civilian casualties (up to and including 100%). The demographic of the country has been changed. Great gaps in population,

here, here, and here. I read, not just of worms in toilets and plague-bearing mosquitoes, but of fungus that takes root in brick and chews a building into rubble within days. Brush up against it, never mind how briefly, it takes root in you, as well. I read of rains of snakes and frogs and other stories so bizarre they strain credulity, yet still they feed the Party's war, and their details are minutely documented, ripe for condemnation.

One other thing I notice.

It's a while before it dawns on me, and then I have to go back, check. But here it is: all these reports are old.

The most recent, six months back. A year ago, there was a glut of them. Then fewer, fewer. Nothing now for six full months.

Derek, in his broadcasts, speaks grimly of the crisis, and the cost.

I wait. I wait. The latest horror, latest strangeness. Nothing. Nothing, after all this time.

The work goes on, as usual.

I DRAG OPEN the cage door. The hinges squeal and put my teeth on edge.

"Go on," I say. "You're free."

They look at me. A handful are still seated on the floor, too weak to stand.

"Go on. Get out."

I walk into the cage. I push them, prod them. Gently, they evade me, sink back into the mass of bodies all around.

They're dying, that's the truth of it. They're dying, and they've nowhere else to go.

"Think of the river," I start shouting. "Think of home!"

I grab the nearest creature's hand, I press it to my brow. It's limp and barely warm. No thoughts. No visions. I wonder if I dreamt it all, or suffered some kind of hallucination: stress, worry, overwork... I walk away, not sad so much as angry now – why won't they save themselves? Why won't they go away? Why won't they do the thing I want?

PART THREE: THIS KILLS US

IT'S OFFICIAL. AFTER ALL THE RUMOURS, ALL THE HOPES, Earth X has slipped beyond our range at last. The Party urges caution. "There may be remnants here that still need to be purged." But no-one gives a damn for that. All we hear is good news, the first in years. It's like surfing on a tidal wave. Like riding on the biggest funfair in the world. It feels incredible. There's dancing in the streets. No booze, no blow, no stimulants, but no-one needs them. How we celebrate! We cheer, we laugh, we kiss in doorways... The Party makes a late attempt to formalise it all with speeches and parades, but take a walk, talk to anyone. The mood is clear. We're free of X.

And of the Party, too.

HARCOURT'S BORED WITH me. I haven't measured up, that's obvious. From Derek, a surprise – a final gift, in a plain brown envelope but tied with a cerise silk ribbon: my UK passport. "Genuine," he reassures me; and with this, and references, I take up a position in a private firm engaged in reconstruction work. Government contracts. Money to be made, perhaps. Though not quite yet. The hardest thing for me, in fact, is learning how to live on what I get, discovering how much my life was filled with Party privilege, how much the war was softened for me by the work I did. Peace, though wonderful, is likely to be hard.

I part from Derek. There's an odd scene in a restaurant. He has assumed I will return to his hotel with him. Instead, I simply kiss him on the cheek, tell him goodbye, and thanks, and walk away. No drama. No big fuss. The drama's over now, leaving for some of us an awkward and uncomfortable gap. I wonder what he'll do. Go back to teaching, I suppose, lusting after students twenty, thirty years his junior, who'll laugh or make complaints if he should dare to follow through. Nostalgic for the days when he had power and status, and people longed to please him. When he was somebody. And yet I'm grateful. Almost fond of him, in some ways. He rescued me. He saved me. I got lucky; one more refugee, just pretty and subservient enough to catch

the boss's eye. Good luck, yes: my good, good luck.

A young man at the office asks me out. He's deferential, courteous, not a bit like what I'm used to. I've changed. I recognise it. I'm harder, tougher, much less tolerant. He takes me to a café. I ask for wine and I can see him mentally count up his cash, frown, then make a show of calling to the waiter, "Wine for the lady!" It comes, and it's disgusting stuff. I make some cruel remarks. He's hurt. He tries to hide it but I see it anyway, and feel so bad that I agree to meet again, not what I'd planned at all. He's too polite even to ask me for a kiss.

This is normality. I'd forgotten how it was. We're equals. I can tell him no, easy as you please, without losing my job, my ID or my legal rights. With this, too, there's a sense of change approaching, good times coming, buoying us up and carrying us on.

So I keep seeing him. I don't really intend to, it just happens, and that's that. I'm fascinated, not so much by him as by the situation. When we quarrel, I can watch him squirm, grow flustered, suddenly scared of losing me. Weird intoxicant, that sense of power: ugly, dangerous, and thrilling too. I back away, he follows me. It's like a dance, this two steps forward, two steps back. One day, I happen to remark I like men with moustaches; next time we meet, he's growing one. I tell him I was kidding, and he shaves it off.

And meanwhile, the world changes again.

The first we hear's a short report on television, clipped and vague: some kind of disturbance in Hyde Park. Then rumours start: a victory rally that turned sour, became a protest at the Party's still unbroken tenure. There was fighting, the police overreacted. Six or seven killed, and dozens hurt. My boyfriend, as I now suppose he is, rushes to see me, terribly protective. "I'm not in any danger," I announce, full of the confidence I had as Derek's right-hand girl. He says I am. He says we all are. He tells me to stay home, to watch the news.

It's like a spark in tinder. Riots move across the country. For four full years we kept Earth X at bay, but this takes only days. In every major city, protests turn to violence, even guerrilla fighting. (We hear shouting outside, turn the lights out, peep between the curtains, but the voices move off, chanting slogans, yelling in the dark. Next night, a huge explosion rocks the city – it's a car bomb at the Party offices, a mile away; it sounds as if it's right next door). The army, already on alert, moves in immediately. There's no diplomacy, no compromise. The TV and the radio cease broadcasting. Anyone caught out on the streets is shot. The suddenness, the savagery, are shocking; though I wonder just how sudden it all is, or whether, somewhere in the Party inner circle, somebody once asked, "What do we do when this is over?" They were so fond of contingencies and what-if plans...

The radio resumes transmission first. There's preamble – someone acting newscaster, no voice I know. Then Derek's solemn, reedy tones. I perk up when I hear him. It's like listening to an old friend. His manner's grim. A second alien intrusion,



he explains, codenamed Earth Z, broke into our world just days ago. Quick response from government and military has so far limited the damage, but at high costs. Earth Z exhibits parasitic traits; ordinary people, once infected, are considered colonised, controlled by alien intelligence. Only the promptness of the Party's actions has prevented far worse loss, and stopped us being overwhelmed.

Once more, our world stands in the gravest peril.

On Earth Z, he says, there is oppressive heat and hundred-mile-an-hour storms. The life forms are aggressive, violent, inimical to man. Together we will stand against it, he declares. Together we will take our place in history as heroes who out-faced the onslaught. You and I, my friends, together, you and I... And even as the broadcast ends, we hear the gunfire in the streets outside.

"You think it's true?" my young friend says. "It's going to start again?"

THE PHONES ARE DOWN. The internet is gone. The curfew's lifted long enough for us to work, shop, carry out our daily duties, and go home – or else. Cafés, pubs and restaurants are closed. Groups of more than three people together constitute conspiracy, and are dealt with as such.

Food is scarce. New graffiti springs up everywhere: x WHY Z? Anyone posting it is shot. (Children are shot.) Anyone reading it, glancing at it casually, is bawled out, beaten. A new militia walks the streets. They wear the Party's red and yellow armbands. Their business is to seek out signs of the invasion. They have powers to stop, search and interrogate. Old scores are settled. A man I know, a small-time dealer on the black market, is beaten till his spleen bursts. Life narrows down. For some, it stops.

My boyfriend moves in. It's the only way to stay alive, pooling our money, cramped up in my one-room flat. Our evenings are disrupted by the ratchet of machine-gun fire, by screaming and the wail of sirens. Once, we see a Party limo glide by in the street below, its armoured, tinted windows utterly opaque. *Derek?* I wonder. *Are you there?* I want to run out, hammer on the doors, beg for him to let me in – but I'd be killed, I know, before I got within a yard.

Earth Z. Hurricanes and fearsome heat.

But here, the skies are grey. The air is still. No blazing winds, no alien intelligence.

And no Earth Z.

We'd always felt disaster, if it came, would come from somewhere else, outside ourselves; that the apocalypse would be inflicted, not embraced.

Instead it comes from people that we know, people we've worked beside, lived beside, slept beside. Just ordinary people. Teachers, lawyers, civil servants, thrust up in the chaos of the war. No-one you'd notice, normally. No-one you'd give a second glance.

Like Derek and his friends.

I think of how he was when we first met, so awkward and

uncertain of himself, so terribly unhappy. And I wonder: when a man like that gains power, can he ever give it up? Turn round, go home, back to his old life, back to his mortgage and his over-draft? His dead-end job? Derek – or anyone?

It's morning, slow grey dawn just creeping through the side streets, and I'm waiting at a checkpoint on my way to work. There's a guard here watching me, the red-and-yellow cap tipped back upon his head so that he looks like some myopic school-boy. It takes a moment till I place him. Then I realise: he was the car parking attendant, when I worked with Derek. It seems like years ago. Today he's wearing Party colours, clipboard in his hand, big, black baton jutting from his belt.

He takes my papers.

"Name?" he says.

I'm hopeful, even now. I smile, I tell him, "You remember me," and once again he looks me up and down – more down than up, to tell the truth – and slowly curls his lip.

"You're Measdon's tart," he says. "As was."

I don't think I was ever rude to him, back in the old days. I used to say hello when we went down to fetch the car, wave as we drove off to meetings, restaurants, hotels.

When I was privileged. Protected.

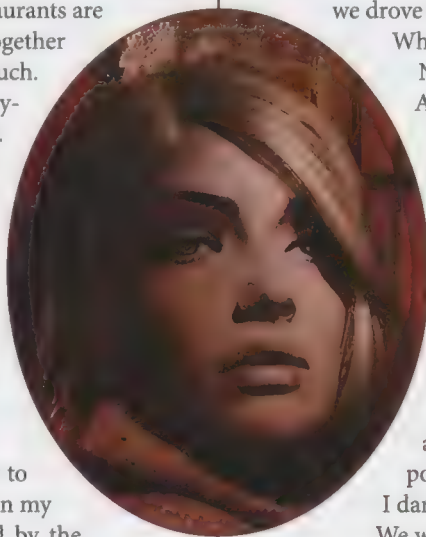
Now he holds my papers out. I reach for them. And one by one, he drops them in the dirt.

He doesn't speak. Just watches while I bend, and scramble on the ground. I feel his gaze lick over me, devouring me, jealous and resentful, prying into every crease and fold and opening.

"You're nothing," he says then. "You're nobody."

He sounds so smug, I want to hit him, kick him, yell at him. Except he's Party. So I stand, brush off my jeans and hug my coat around myself, press Derek's precious passport to my breast. And walk away, as quickly as I dare, half-terrified he'll call me back.

We won a war. We sang, we danced, we partied in the streets. Yet would Earth X have been much worse than this, I ask? Would it have been so terrible to lose?



> Tim Lees is the author of the psychedelic noir novel *Gods of L.A.* (reviewed by Peter Tennant in the current issue of *Black Static*, #18, and available from amazon and other online retailers) and a new novel, *Frankenstein's Prescription*, due from Tartarus Press (tartaruspress.com) at the end of the year. He can currently be seen on the Literature Northwest site of YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=slhZvE3QTo) chattering nervously and reading in a bad American accent. More novels and short stories are to come, while some of his older material can be found at timlees.wordpress.com, and in a 2005 story collection called *The Life to Come* published by Elastic Press (elasticpress.com). Tim's most recent appearance in *Interzone* was in #218 with the very well received 'The Corner of the Circle'. He's also published many stories in our sister magazines *Crimewave* and *Black Static*, most recently in *Black Static* #9 with 'The Plains', and several in *The Third Alternative* before it, going right back to the beginning...

Please check our website at ttapress.com for details and ordering of all available back issues of *Interzone*, *Crimewave* and *Black Static/The Third Alternative*.

AGE of MIRACLES,



AGE of WONDERS

Aliette de Bodard



THE GOD

THE WEALS ON COZTIC'S BACK HAVE BEGUN TO HEAL BY THE TIME they reach Axahuacan. The marks of the chains on his ankles and wrists – the deep burn lines rimmed with red, puffed skin, encrusted with scabs – haven't. At night, when the moon rises over the desert, its light as pale as the faces of corpses, he shifts in the copper cage and feels pain lance through his limbs, as familiar and as welcome as an old enemy.

The hierarch walks ahead of the cage and its guards, the metal of its face turned straight ahead. If it thinks of anything – if metal and cogs and wheels can have thoughts – it doesn't say. Even when wielding the salted knives, or the barbed whip, or the branding irons, it's never displayed any emotion. Perhaps what they say is true, and it is nothing more than an extension of the god-machine, a hunk of copper shaped in mockery of flesh and bone, just as mankind was once shaped of maize and blood.

Perhaps. Coztic leans back against the bars of the cage, and watches the moon, and tries not to think of Axahuacan, or the death that awaits him there – another in the long, unending string of deaths and rebirths that have been his lot since he was captured.

Axahuacan is a small mining town, away from the centres of population that make up the greater part of the Commonwealth: a handful of buildings scattered around a central plaza, where the dust doesn't quite hide the remains of an old temple – a broken pyramid, the altar stone ground into fine, reddish sand, the steps reduced to chunks of stone where traces of sacrificial blood can still be seen.

The guards move the cage there, into the centre, hammer stakes into the ground, and let Coztic out, anchoring him to the earth with metal chains tied to ankles and wrists and neck, their weight bowing him down like a suppliant.

Soon, he knows, the sun will swing higher into the sky, and the weight will burn.

The hierarch takes position by Coztic's side, holding one of the barbed whips in his hand with artful, deceptive casualness, as if it were a fruit or a rock, of little consequence in the scheme of things.

Slowly, hesitantly, the crowd gathers: a ragtag assortment of men, women and children, their faces stained with the soot of the mine. They stand watching him, their faces dark and unreadable, their eyes drinking in the light like obsidian beads.

"See how they have fallen," the hierarch says. Its voice is cool, with oddly-placed accents, and it carries with it the echo of something far greater. "Their power has drained away, their deeds have become nothing, their bodies have been given to us."

A shiver runs through the crowd; and a whisper, growing in intensity. "See how far they have fallen."

"You bled," the hierarch says. "You gave husbands, wives and children to quench their never-ending thirst for human blood. You bled." It flicks its hand and the whip uncoils, passing within a hair's breadth of Coztic's back without breaking the skin: a caress, a promise. "Now you will make him bleed."

"He will bleed." The crowd's voice is a hiss like that of the whip. Once, they would have been on their knees, worshipping him. Once they would have begged him to accept hearts torn from the sacrifices' chests, flayed painted skins, corpses. Once...

How far they have fallen. Scattered, like dandelion seeds on barren terrain: the Master of the Smoking Mirror wounded, his power shattered; the Feathered Serpent, sealed under the earth; Lord Death, dead himself, gone past recall; Grandmother Earth, who engendered them all, vanished in the upheaval. And the offerings dwindling away to nothing, until the last of them sits there in this small town, under the sun, waiting with his head bowed to be broken, time and time again, an eternal reminder of who is master and who is slave.

"There will be a reckoning tomorrow," the hierarch says. Its voice rings like chimes, with the echo of something far greater behind him. "A scourging and a bleeding and a rising, for the god that was, and has been, and will be, in this age and the next and the next."

Coztic twists his body to watch the crowd caught in the rapture of the hierarch's communion, their faces slack and vacant, their hands clenched into fists. There is something in the air, some hint of the familiar beyond the pain in his limbs. There is –

His eyes are drawn to the edge of the crowd, where a woman stands, wrapped in a diaphanous veil that hides her face. The rising wind catches her clothes, whips them around her tall, lean body. Alone among the whole crowd, she is at rest: arms by her side, legs planted firmly into the ground, as if the communion's blood-frenzy merely passed her by. The wind lifts the veil away from her face, and for a split second he sees golden eyes, and lips curled in what might have been a smile – no, not a smile, but a word.

His name – not Coztic, but the older one, the one he had when he was the warrior-sun.

"Who are you?" The words are out of his mouth before he can stop them – drowned by the clamour of the crowd, but she hears them all the same.

Her head bends in a taut, regal gesture worthy of an empress, her lips curl, and this time it's a wild, feral smile like a jaguar sighting a prey.

And then, before he can ask anything else, she turns and walks

away, unseen, unheeded.

THE HIERARCH

It is a hard thing to be here – not because of the scourging, not because of the being who was once a god, who now lies broken, bowed under the weight of burning chains. No, it is because of the distance.

The hierarch's name is Chicome, which means 'seven' in the old language, and he is named thus because he was the seventh of his kind to emerge from the bowels of the god-machine. For most of his existence, he has never left the capital: he remembers only the warren of tunnels and pipes in the vast palace, the corridors filled with the smoke of copal incense, the ground and the walls vibrating with the endless thrumming, the beat of the machine that is, and was, and will always be, in this age and the next. But then the god – the last of his kind – was captured, and the machine itself gave him a task, a message to give the Commonwealth.

Chicome did not think it would be such a hard one, when he accepted.

Here, everything feels wrong. The sun beats down on the silent desert, and everything is motionless, bathed in golden light. Almost against his will, he finds himself walking out of Axahuacan, past the huddled huts of adobe and the rowdy peyotl-houses, into the silence of the evening.



The last of the sunlight shines on the rails – the slender rods of copper that crisscross the Commonwealth, carrying the god-machine's voice to the furthest places, even here, even in this forsaken place where everything is silent and still. Chicome walks

a bit more, lays a hand on the rail. The voice is weak, but he can still hear it: fragments of songs and hymns and instructions, and news of who has merged with whom, and the newest hierarchs emerged from the machine, bearing numbers in the thousands.

He doesn't know how long he spends there, engrossed in the communion with the machine, but when he looks up, the sun has sunk below the rim of the mountains, and the first stars have emerged. Chicome watches them for a while, wheeling into familiar patterns: a reassuring sight, their clusters and patterns utterly stripped of the divinities that once controlled them.

It hurts, being so far away – an ache, an emptiness somewhere in his chest, where he has neither heart nor lungs, a pain that seems to have no roots. Chicome understands the whips and the brands and the burnings, the violations against the integrity of the body, the piling up of malfunctions, and the fear of shut-down. But this, this insidious thing with no name, shouldn't be, not in an ordered universe purged from the last of the old gods' madness and magic.

Movement catches his eye, ahead in the darkness: a flash of billowing, diaphanous white. A veiled woman – not bowed or broken like the rest of the townsfolk, but walking at a rapid pace, as if she knew exactly where she was going.

He runs after her, but, though she seems to be slow, he can never quite catch up with her. And then a stronger gust of wind rocks her and scatters her into a thousand reflections, like a

mirage dispelled by the cold.

Chicome doesn't believe in ghosts, or in spirits. The numinous world was that of the gods, and the gods have been defeated. Spirits should be gone, too, except that the air is colder around him, and he can't quite banish the image of the veil breaking down into light.

He stands now in a much quieter place. Like the central plaza, it was a temple once, a small shrine in the desert, surrounded by simple, low adobe walls, its foundations exposed in the starlight. The altar stone itself is gone, and the ground is now warm with the vibrations of the rails.

An old woman kneels over one of the darker patches of earth, whispering a hymn to the machine. For a moment he wonders if she could have been the veiled woman, but no, she's much too slight and frail to have led him on a chase through the desert. Her back is bowed – like that of the god, he remembers uneasily – and she's laid bread and cactus alcohol atop the grave as funeral offerings. A long-handled incense burner lies by her side. She is clearly too weak and frail to wield it above the grave.

Chicome lifts it easily. The smell of copal resin wafts up to him with the smoke, an unexpected reminder of the emptiness within.

If the old woman is afraid, she doesn't show it: no jerky movements, no rise in her heartbeat, not even a slight flush on her weathered skin. Calmly, she finishes her prayer, and folds her hands over the bread, laying it in a circle pattern – for the sun, for the soul, for the machine?

"Your son?" Chicome asks. The graves in a shrine used to be those of sacrifices, in the times before the rise of the machine.

"My daughters." The old woman's voice is quiet, almost emotionless, the answer to a question too often asked. "They bled for Grandmother Earth, to bring the maize harvest." She sounds proud, or sad, or angry – he can't tell.

"Those times are past," he says, finally. It isn't his role to comfort her. He is metal and wires, and those can feel no emotion for muscles and blood. "Grandmother Earth is gone." Dead or vanished, it doesn't matter. Her power came from blood, and those sacrifices have stopped.

"They say the earth cries out for blood, in the dark," the old woman says, her gaze calm, remote. "You can hear her, at the bottom of the mine, whimpering for everything that was promised her at the beginnings, the human hearts to keep her satiated, the human skins to clothe her broken, violated body."

It sounds like a quote, but it comes from no hymn that he knows. "Those times are past," he says, again. "You'll see that, tomorrow." Again and again, until they know it in their heart of hearts, in their bones and in their veins, that the gods are bound or dead, and the machine's rule is the only one that matters.

And then he can go home, and the emptiness in his chest will cease to matter.

THE BOY

OLD IZEL – WHO isn't Tiacapan's mother, but who raised him all the same – always says that there are spirits in the mine.

Tiacapan used to laugh about it, until he became old enough to enter the mine himself, to stand in the dark by the door he guards, opening it for carts and mules to pass through, and closing it again so that the wind doesn't blow coal dust, or worse, throughout the mine.

It's silent, underneath, with just the warmth of the earth above, the crushing sense of his own insignificance. Somewhere high overhead are the rails leading back to the god-machine, but this deep under the earth it doesn't reach. It's just them – and the voices.

Izel said they were the ghosts of sacrifice victims, from the old days, but Izel's children were cut open for Grandmother Earth, and everything she says or does carries the scars of that sacrifice. Tiacapan doesn't think they are living things, those voices. They speak in no words that he can understand, sing no tunes that would make sense.

Today is worse. Even the rumble of the carts and the distant sounds of explosions aren't enough to cover the insistent, insidious whispers in his ears. There's a song, on the verge of hearing, with the cadences of an old hymn: calm, stately and measured. He doesn't understand the words or the meaning, but it's soothing in a way he can't pinpoint. It reminds him of his mother, the one he lost in the upheavals when the machine rose. He doesn't remember much, just arms, holding him while people scream in the background, the heat of some large construct passing them

by, and the sense that, no matter how frightening or bewildering the world beyond might be, he is safe, held tightly by someone vaster and greater than him.

With a shock, he comes to, realising he's been humming the hymn for a while. He stands

in the dark, and watches it – there's light in the shadows, if you watch for long enough, reflections and snatches of the world above. There is...

A silhouette, which might be a man or a woman, wrapped in billowing clothes – there shouldn't be a wind in the mine, but it blows to him the scent of flowers and freshly-cut grass, and another, sharp unfamiliar smell that cuts under his ribs like a knife.

For one agonising moment he thinks he sees a silhouette reaching out to him, with hands outstretched, the fingers curling inwards like claws...

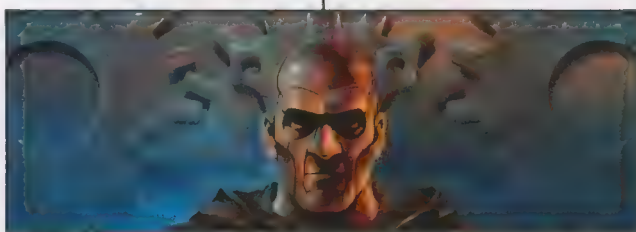
And then he shakes his head, and everything is gone.

When the bell rings for the end of the day, he feels as though he's been under the earth forever, his lungs clogged with the dust and the smell of coal. But when he and the other workers emerge from the mine it's only sunset, and the overseer is waiting for them at the end of the rise, where the rock meets the sky.

They look at each other, uncertain. Their existence in the mine is regulated like the clockwork of the god-machine's creation, from dawn to late into the night. Never before has the bell rung early.

Atl, the burly driver who's in charge of the furthest tunnels – and the closest thing to a headman they have among them – approaches the overseer cautiously. "Sir. It's early –"

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he's had parts fitted in all the same: copper cheeks and metal arms, glinting in the last of the daylight. "It's a festival tomorrow. Go clean yourselves up, and feast. Have to be strong, for the scourging."

The scourging. A chance to make the old gods pay – for Old Izel, for all the countless victims and the blood shed.

It doesn't sit right somehow.

"Tiacapan!" The overseer's voice tears him from his musings. "In my office."

Tiacapan gazes regretfully at the other workers, who are already shedding their oil-soaked clothes, laughing and jostling each other, looking forward to the evening. Why single him out? He's probably done something wrong again. If he's lucky, it'll just be another beating, leaving him a little more stiff and bruised, but nothing he can't handle.

If he's not lucky...

The overseer speaks with the voice of the god-machine, and the machine is never wrong. If it decides that Tiacapan is to be dismantled, then it will be done. It isn't as if the mine lacks workers, or children willing to enter it, who would do anything to alleviate the misery of their existence in the town.

He can't help but shiver as he enters the office. The place is almost as dark as the mine. The little light there is glints on the metal rings and discipline instruments, from whips to barbed gloves, and others, larger ones encrusted with old blood.

The overseer sits cross-legged on a reed mat, playing absent-mindedly with one of the small whips – coiling, uncoiling it much as the hierarch did above the chained god. But his face is creased in concern, and not in righteous anger. A good sign, perhaps. Tiacapan's learnt not to be overly optimistic when it comes to the overseer's expressions.

"You wanted to see me," Tiacapan says.

"Yes." The overseer glances at the whip as if seeing it for the first time. "Be careful."

Careful? "I don't understand."

"That – thing on the plaza –"

"The god."

"Yes, the god." The overseer grimaces. To him, as to the hierarchs, there's only one god, and everything else is blasphemy. "He liked young men. Young and bloody, with strong beating hearts, torn from their chests. He..."

Tiacapan thinks of hands holding him at wrists and ankles, of the sacrifice stone digging into his back, arching his chest upwards to meet the cold kiss of the knife as it parts his skin. He feels cold suddenly. "Atl is young too. The others –"

"Young and unblemished." The overseer sighs. "You entered the mine a month ago. It hasn't left its mark on you."

Tiacapan thinks of the voices, and how he hears them, even in his sleep. But of course it isn't what the overseer means. Everyone in the mine is bent, or broken, or both. The older ones have grit under their skin that can't be washed away, and a hacking cough from the coal dust in their lungs. He knows it's all he can look forward to; a better existence than starving to death outside, or wandering, a townless beggar living on the charity

of others. "I see." What he wants to say is that he's old enough to take care of himself, and fitter to do so than Old Izel, whose mind sometimes wanders far afield from the real world, but one doesn't say such things to the overseer. "I see. Thank you."

He walks back to the city in the dark, his tinder, lamp and oil under his bruised arms, his legs aching, with only the memory of the voices to keep him company. Another night, he might have followed the others, might have sung and danced, and perhaps even taken a sip of alcohol, though the god-machine frowns upon drunkenness.

But tonight, he just heads home to rest his aching muscles, hoping Izel will be there, and not wandering in the dark the machine knows where.

He sees no ghosts.

THE MOTHER

IN THE END, as she's always known, Izel isn't able to help herself. Walking back from her children's graves, she finds her steps leading her back to the plaza, and to the figure in chains at the centre.

The sun has come down, cooling the metal: it's the hour of Old Man Fire, when the chains will still be warm in that suspended instant before the cold seizes the desert, and they begin to burn him again with a different kind of pain.

For a moment, Izel thinks she sees something else in the dark – a pale, veiled silhouette bending over the god as if to whisper a word in his ears – but then the starlight shifts, and the god is alone again.

He raises his eyes when Izel approaches, watching her without a word. The chains clink in the silence, cutting his movements short. In appearance, he is a youth, with a shock of yellow hair that shines even in the moonlight, and eyes without pupils, the same yellow as his hair. Here and there the skin is cut, raw and bleeding. His posture is tense. He expects Izel to strike him, or insult him, or whatever else the other townsfolk have done. They are meant to keep him whole for tomorrow, but whole doesn't mean unharmed.

"Which one are you?" Izel asks.

He's silent for so long that she thinks he's lost human speech, but then he speaks, his voice quiet and measured. "The Southern Hummingbird. The warrior-sun."

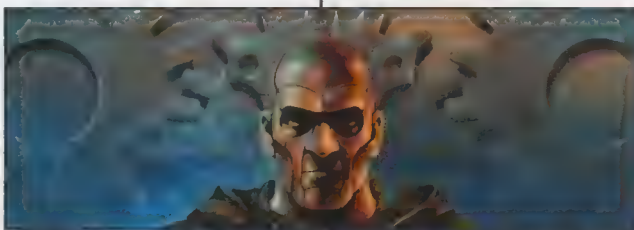
"I see." Her voice, too, is quiet. She keeps it so. "I lost two children to a god, but it wasn't you."

"Make no mistake: I would have taken them, were they offered." His eyes hold her, clear and merciless and utterly inhuman. "I will not beg for mercy, or for forgiveness."

The warrior-sun, broken and bowed, but still brimming with casual arrogance. Something shifts and breaks inside Izel, a dam pressed against for too long. "Perhaps you should. Crawl on your knees and beg for mercy, for all you've done. Or do you expect a miracle to save you?"

His lips quirk. "The age of miracles is past."

"Miracles?" Izel clenches her hands. She watched on the edge of town, watched Xoco and Papan, watched them tied onto the



altar stones, the priests tightening a cord around their wrists to make the veins bulge, watched them as their blood drained out from the wide, jagged cuts of the knives, growing paler and paler until all that was left were corpses, small and empty and pathetic, nothing like the glorious dead the priests had droned on about. She watched their funeral afterwards, then came back to an empty home, knowing the pain of their absence would never vanish. The priests told her they were in the Heavens now, that the gods would shelter them in their bosom. But what Heavens can they expect now that the gods are dead? "Unless you can bring back those we sacrificed to you, you won't speak of miracles."

"As you wish." He manages to make it sound not like acquiescence but like a favour.

"I'll leave you, then." Izel isn't sure what she expected, what she thought he could grant her, as if he were still a god, as if she still owed him any kind of worship, any kind of sacrifice.

Machine break him – it's nothing more, nothing less than he deserved.

She's almost at the edge of the plaza when he speaks again. "I don't know where they are."

"What?" Izel turns. The chains glint in the moonlight, and he winces when he shifts, his breath hanging in the air – they must be ice-cold.

"Our dead. Yours." His face twists; it would be a smile, if there was an ounce of joy in it. "All the abodes – the underworld, the Heavens – are closed to us now. The machine might know."

Or it might not, but either way, why would it tell her, so small and insignificant in the scheme of things?

"Wherever they are," Izel says, more savagely than she intended, "they're rid of you. And that's the best thing that could happen to them."

"As you wish."

This time, she leaves without looking back.

THE GOD

THE DAY DAWNS, and Coztic shifts in ice-cold chains. The sun rises, red and swollen like a canker. Today. Today is the day.

Truth is, he isn't sure he can bear the pain any more. He would cry out to be saved – for a miracle, if he believed in any. But it's as he told the old woman: the age of miracles is past, and they have fallen.

He wishes he could pray, and believe that someone somewhere would hear his prayers.

Red light bathes him, warms him, and he remembers a different light: the earth pressed all around him, gathering him into its warm, wet embrace. He remembers words, whispered into his ears, about blood owed to them, about the food mortals would provide, and how he was pushed upwards, emerging into a circle of light, a terrible thirst in his throat and in his stomach – a thirst he now knew to be the same as that of the earth under his feet, the same he would take into the Heavens: human blood and human hearts, daily devotions to slake the emptiness within.

It is the only birth he has ever known, the only embrace that has ever been comforting, and, in his hour of need, the only memory that will come, like seawater poured over old wounds, soothing and yet with an aftermath of bitter prickling.

There is a smell, like cut maize, like green grass, and a presence over him, like hands laid on his shoulders, as if he were back in the memory. "Grandmother?" Coztic strains to look up, but the chains cut into his flesh, arresting his movement.

There is nothing here, in any case. There never was. Just the promise of pain and death, and of rising, again and again, into chains that can never be broken.

Footsteps echo on the ground, metallic and harsh: the hierarch and the guards. The chains are unlocked, he is pulled upwards, brought to the edge of the plaza while they prepare the dais for the ceremony. The hierarch is quiet, as usual, but for some reason Coztic cannot help taunting it.

"What will it be this time?" he asks. "Whips, brands?"

The hierarch doesn't answer. At length it shifts, and speaks in a grave voice, the preacher before its congregation. "They used stones, in the old days. For adulterers and murderers."

"You never liked the old days," Coztic hears himself say.

"No." Its voice is firm. "Those days are behind us, and they won't come back. But there is a fitting symmetry."

Stones – a hail of projectiles, breaking against – no, he can't think about that. He was the sun, once, and he will not be broken. He will not fear. "Is this justice, then?" he asks.

The hierarch smiles, mirthless. "You know it's not. Nothing will account for the blood you spread, for all the lives you took."

Not surprising. But still – still, he can't bring himself to be silent, as if something within had ruptured with the old woman's visit. "The machine preaches forgiveness."

"For humans. Which you are not."

"I bleed."

"And die, and rise again." The hierarch's gaze is on the dais, on which the guards are installing the machine's sacred symbols: the Cog, the Chain, the Bolt, the Wires and the Vial, shining in the dawn light. "Most humans don't."

And he wasn't born of woman – wasn't born of anything save the earth, the hungry earth.

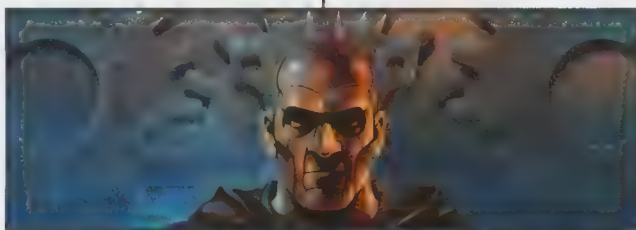
He wishes he could shrink again, sink beneath the soil – sleeping voiceless, without pain or fear, in the embrace of the beginnings. But the ground is seared and soulless, blasted and raped to take coal out of its entrails, and Grandmother Earth is dead.

There is no escape.

THE HIERARCH

AS USUAL, CHICOME rises early – not that he has slept, merely lain against a wall in a small hut, watching the stars shift in the sky, his hands held against his chest as if they could fill the gaping void.

Is this a nightmare, he wonders, is this endless wandering his



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punishment, the underworld the machine reserves for those who have disappointed?

He doesn't have an answer.

The god is unusually talkative, and something seems to have shifted in a way that Chicome can't pinpoint. After a pointless, hollow conversation, he suddenly understands what has changed: not the god or the town, but him. The emptiness, the longing in his chest has become unbearable. He shouldn't have communed with the machine yesterday, shouldn't have reached out for that one taste of home. For most of the journey, he's clung on to his memories of the capital, but now he sees that they were nothing more than husks, brittle metal taken for steel. Now he measures the gap between memory and reality, and is hurt by what he cannot have.

He watches the guards hammer a post into the earth, at the very centre of the city, on the ruins of the temple. Each hammer strike echoes in his chest, metal against metal, spreading to his whole body, a dull pain that echoes the craving within him. He wants to get away from all this, to run out of town and lay his hands on the rails, to feel again the communion with the machine and his brothers. But he cannot. He has a duty to do, no matter how it might distress him.

The god is silent while they drag him to the post and chain him there, arms stretched upwards. Once, Chicome remembers, they tied young men that way, and pierced them with arrows, an offering to the Flayed God to make the harvest plentiful.

The god's eyes are yellow, the colour of the corn in the old fields. He watches Chicome, his face expressionless – but then the light of the rising sun shifts, and Chicome sees the same hunger for home, the same longing for the company of his peers etched into every feature.

And then it's gone, and it's only a...thing chained before him – flesh and bone and muscles, which can be broken, which can be bent to his will. "You're right," he says to the god. "This isn't justice. But then you never provided any."

Machine watch over him, he can't take much more of this.

He walks to the dais, raises his hands, and feels, growing within him, the memory of the machine and of the capital, a shiver running down his arms like the flow of information shared with his brothers – nothing as potent as touching the rails, or being back home, but, still, enough to hold the emptiness at bay.

If only for a little while.

THE MOTHER

IZEL WALKS WITH Tiacapan to the plaza, for the scourging. The townsfolk have gathered in a loose circle to face the god, now chained bolt upright against a post hammered into the earth.

There are piles of stones just outside of the plaza. The hierarch is standing on a raised platform, his thin arms raised towards the sky. "Brothers," he calls. "We who have bled."

"We who have bled," the crowd intones.

"Behold, for the Age of Wonders has come."

There is something in the air, a tightening like an electric arc,

a sense of something greater than they are. Izel feels the rails under her feet, vibrating, and the presence of the god-machine, suffusing her with warmth.

"Let the old gods remain dead, let the altars be of pristine steel, let the blood and the breath remain in our bodies..."

The god is watching her – corn-yellow eyes, pale skin, and the same lack of expression she saw on the faces of the priests who killed her children. She sees blood, falling upon the furrows of the earth; she hears whimpers like those of dying animals, as Xoco and Papan grow paler, there on the old altars. The air is sharp with the tang of blood.

I would have taken them, were they offered.

Her hand gropes downwards, finds a stone. With all her strength she hurls it at the god – to smash into his face, to veil the eyes with blood, tear the white skin – make him suffer as her children suffered, as she has suffered those past years.

The stone flies, glances from his shoulder, and he flinches, and she feels as though it's herself that she's hurt.

Her hand is already reaching for another one – stone after stone after stone, a steady hail to break him and silence him forever.

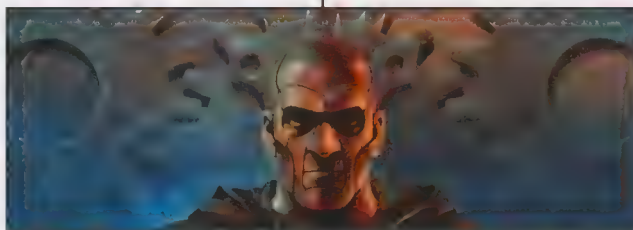
I don't know where they are. All the abodes – the underworld, the Heavens – are closed to us now. But the machine might know.

She sees herself then, walking to the hierarch, or better yet, to the capital, to the fumes and the metal corridors, to the palace and the god-machine crouching spider-like at its centre. She sees herself standing before it at the heart of its strength, demanding to know where her children are. But no, it's folly to think so, blasphemy – she can't do that.

She must do her duty, and hurl stone after stone and watch him reel back from all of them, crying out in anguish, his hands tightening as if to reach for a mother he never had.

For he is a god, a drinker of blood, an inhuman monster with no pity, the same who took her children, who would take them again and again. He deserves nothing less than this, the same pain he inflicted on others, magnified a thousandfold. For Xoco and Papan, and for all the children who never lived, for all those lost before the upheaval, all the dead vanished into insignificance.

Why, then, does each stone feel as if it were torn from her breast?



THE BOY

TIACAPAN, MORE AGILE than Izel, slides out of her grasp, worming his way through the crowd until he stands close enough to touch the god. The god stares back at him, his lips parted, his gaze on Tiacapan's. There's something in his eyes, a desperate plea, a desperate...

Hunger, Tiacapan thinks. He remembers what the overseer said, about young boys. A monster, who will feast on human hearts because it doesn't know otherwise, because it's always known how to ask for blood, and be answered.

But the rules have changed now.

"Let the sun remain silent, let our prayers be made with

forges and furnaces, let the blood and the breath remain in our bodies..."

The first stone is out of his hand almost before he realises it, but then it's only a matter of finding more, of hurling them one after the other at this pale face, to blot out the hollowed cheeks and the hungry gaze – stone after stone after stone, and the... thing reeling and howling like a hurt animal, the sounds of its pain a warm feeling spreading into Tiacapan's chest.

There's a sharp, unfamiliar smell rising, like a knife sliding under his ribs, and this time he knows what it is, he knows what is spreading over the beaten earth, pulsing and as red as any sacrifice's blood.

His mother stands on the edge of the crowd, veiled in white, her clothes billowing in the wind, and he can see her smile even through the veil, white and sharp and predatory.

Make him bleed.

She wavers in and out of focus, as if she were larger than the body that hosts her, and he sees her through blurred eyes, unsure that she's even there at all. He throws one more stone, and she vanishes into a thousand fragments of fractured light, forever beyond his reach.

Make him bleed.

And he knows that nothing will make her come back, that he's destined for the mine and the backbreaking work just as Izel's children were marked for sacrifice, that he will live and work and die in an age of steel, and that he doesn't know, not any more, if this age, this bright new age of wonders, is any better than that of the old gods.

THE GOD

EACH STONE IS agony. The first only bruise his skin, but they never stop coming, hurled one after the other, faster and faster. The next ones open wide gashes into his skin, strike upon his bones in searing pain. The crowd surrounds him, a mass of dark, hate-filled faces, of arms and legs pressed against each other, fighting to be the one to throw the next stone, to see him recoil, and feast upon his screams.

He cries out at first, but then his voice goes, and all that remains are small whimpers. He sags against the chain, which goes taut, digging into his wrists and the flesh of his arms, a dull pain against the sharp flashes every time a stone strikes him. The smell of his own blood wafts up, thin and stretched and powerless, but what he wouldn't give to put it back into his own body, to drink it as he once drunk that of thousands...

His mind wanders, trying to shield itself from the pain, as it always does. No matter how frequent the ordeals are, they never become easier –

And, beyond the sharp, tantalising tang of his own blood, a memory of how things used to be: there is another smell, a wet warm one rising to enfold him, a flimsy shield against the pain. There is movement on the edge of his field of vision, a flash of white against the hail of stones.

He sees her, then, as each stone sinks into his flesh, as he strains against the chains in his agony. She is the wind and the clouds and the seared ground, smiling with small, sharp jaguar's

teeth, her white shift billowing in the breeze like the wings of an eagle. Her face is that of the hierarch, standing rigid on the dais; of the boy jeering at him in the front row; of the old woman throwing stones like pieces of her heart.

"The age of miracles," he whispers – or tries to, but all that comes out of his mouth is ragged breaths, and the beginning of a scream that scrapes his lungs raw.

She inclines her head, regal and proud. Her eyes are the yellow of cut maize, of tomato flowers, a bright colour from another age, one without mines and without rails, without the constant haze of factories. And he knows her name – the name he has always known, always carried with him. In another day, in another time, she birthed them all, the Master of the Smoking Mirror, Lord Death, the Feathered Serpent – and himself, the Fifth Sun, the warrior-sun.

Grandmother Earth.

She's dead, or powerless, but she looks neither.

A stone catches his tied hand, bends it out of shape in a swift, searing movement, and he hears the bones of his wrist snap. For a moment, a blessed moment, he can ignore the pain – but then it expands, an agony laid over the pain of the other wounds, the blood running down his skin, drop after drop subsumed into the harsh, dry earth.

She still watches him from the edge of the crowd. Her face is sad, or angry, or filled with the fierce joy of sacrificed victims, those who *knew* that they had earned their way into the Heavens.

He can't tell, not any more.

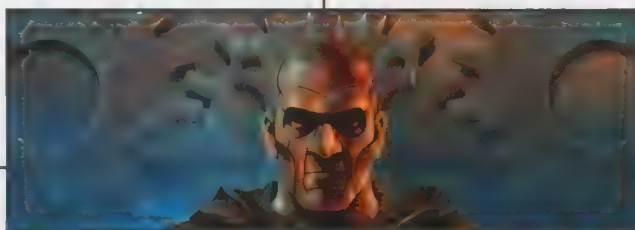
On her lips is his name – the old one, the one from when he was still a god, feeding on the pain of sacrifices. It echoes

in the mangled remains of his chest, sends a painful shiver through his whole body. He arches, futilely, against the post, as the coming hail shatters the ribs in his chest, with a snap like bent twigs.

And he knows, then, that the hierarch is wrong, that the old woman was wrong. The past isn't dead, the age of miracles isn't gone. What was once blood has become pain, and loneliness, and fear, and the chains of the past; and she feeds on it all, as she once drank the blood of children.

Come, she whispers. Her shadow flares up, stretching across the desert and the town, and the faces darkened by fury, and finally across his broken, bleeding body – and she catches him, cocooning him in blessed oblivion.

She will hold him as she always has, and all the others too, those who stumble and fall in the service of the god-machine; she will hold them all within her withered bosom, again and again, until the time comes for rebirth, and the breaking of all chains.



> Aliette de Bodard lives and writes in Paris, where she has a day job as a Computer Engineer. She started this story wondering what an Aztec steampunk from several points of view would look like – and threw in the Old West, a coal mine and an imprisoned god for sheer fun. Her Aztec noir novel *Servant of the Underworld* is out now from Angry Robot, with a sequel forthcoming in 2011. Visit aliottedebodard.com for more information on her and her fiction.

> Lavie Tidhar grew up on a kibbutz in Israel and has lived variously in South Africa, the UK, Asia and the remote island-nation of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Lavie's first novel, *The Bookman*, was published in January by Angry Robot. His other works include novellas *An Occupation of Angels*, *Cloud Permutations* and *Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God*, story collection *HebrewPunk*, and collaborative novel *The Tel Aviv Dossier* (with Nir Yaniv), as well as numerous short stories. Forthcoming works include the novels *Martian Sands* and *Osama*.

The Insurance Agent

LAVIE TIDHAR

THE BAR WAS PACKED AND EVERYONE WAS WATCHING the Nixon-Reagan match. The fighters were reflected off the bar's grainy wood countertop and the tables' gleaming surfaces and seemed to melt as they flickered down the legs of the scattered chairs. The bar was called the Godhead, which had a lot to do with why I was there. It was a bit of an unfair fight as Reagan was young, pre-presidency, circa-World War Two, while Nixon was heavy-set, older: people were exchanging odds and betting with the bar's internal gaming system and the general opinion seemed to be that though Reagan was in better shape Nixon was meaner.

I wasn't there for the match.

The Godhead was on Pulau Sepanggar, one of the satellite islands off Borneo, hence nominally under Malaysian federal authority but in practice in a free zone that had stronger ties to the Brunei Sultanate. It was a convenient place to meet, providing easy access to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and, of course, Singapore, which resented the island's role as a growing business centre yet found it useful at the same time.

She wore a smart business suit and a smart communication system that looked like what it was, which was a custom-made gold bracelet on her left arm. She wore smart shades and I was taking a bet that she wasn't watching the fight. She was drinking a generic Cola but there was nothing generic about her. I slid into a chair beside her and waited for her shades to turn transparent and notice me.

"Drink, Mr Turner?"

I liked the name Turner. It was Anglo-Saxon generic, a mid-level executive's name, white as beige. "Call me James," I said. I liked James too. You could tell what a James Turner did just by hearing his name. The rest of me was tailor-made for the name, had been for some time: I had the kind of tan that suggested I had been East for just long enough to have acquired it, black hair that was short but not too short and had a decent but not overly-expensive cut, pale blue eyes behind shades that cost a lot of money to look like a knock-off.



There was a suggestion of a smile in the corners of her mouth and she said, "I don't think I will."

"Mr Turner, then," I said. "One name's good as another."

"Quite," she said. There was something dismissive in that single word. *For the likes of you*, was what it implied. "Thanks," I said. "I think I'll have that drink."

"Preference?" she said.

I said "Orange juice," wanted vodka. She didn't say anything, didn't have to. A moment later a waiter glided over and deposited the drink on the table, moisture condensing on the outer surface of the manifold that was the glass. I took a sip, put it down again into the ring of water that had immediately formed. Below, Nixon knocked out Reagan in the second round. I heard groans and shouts around me, tried to tune them out.

"What can I do for you?" I said.

I couldn't quite tell where she was from. She had pale skin carefully kept out of the sun, an Oxford-acquired accent and eyes I couldn't see. She said, "I would like to buy insurance."

"That," I said, possibly a little stiffly, "is why we're here."

"Quite," she said again, and I felt I won the round – she did not like to waste her words and by answering me she had already thrown out six.

"Is this personal insurance or – ?" I said and she said, a little too quickly, "Personal."

"Who's the IE?" I said.

She frowned for a moment and I could almost feel her scanning some remote database. Then she relaxed and again I had the impression of an almost-smile. The next fight was announced, Lenin versus Ho Chi Minh. I'd heard a rumour the company behind the fights modelled Lenin on his actual, mummified body, but it seemed unlikely. I don't know how they did Uncle Ho.

They were circling each other and I was taking a sip of juice when she said, "The Insurable Entity's name is Kim," and I almost choked on a cube of ice, which wasn't very professional.

"Do you fear she is in danger?"

It was her round and she knew it. She didn't answer me but she smiled. Of course she was in danger. Aliens always are.

TO UNDERSTAND KIM, you have to understand the Alien Theory of Spiritual Beings. It has been in and out of vogue since the early twentieth century, and goes something as follows:

There have always been, throughout human history, figures of extraordinary spiritual power, who have changed the course of human history. These figures have been, without exception, aliens.

As a theory it isn't quite provable, of course. And purists always argue about the List. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Jean D'arc, L. Ron Hubbard, Elvis, Uri Geller, sure. But what about Marx, Hildegard of Bingen, Madonna or Ogko (if he was even real)? The problem was that the theory gained, if not credibility, then popular appeal some time post-Ogko and, to make matter worse, was complicated with the addition of the Conflict Codicil.

The Conflict Codicil of the Alien Theory of Spiritual Beings suggests that the alien manifestations on Earth belong to two

or more opposing factions. What these factions are, or how many of them exist, is unknown, but the addition of the CC led to several bloodied clashes, most notably the Gellerite-Elron War in the South Pacific and the destruction of the Singularity Jesus project in South East Asia by forces unknown (various factions have been accused over the years, including Mossad, the Vatican and the SCR, the so-called Special Committee on Relativity, since listed as a terrorist organisation by the UN).

Which is where I come into all this.

I TOOK THE shuttle to Kota Kinabalu. From there by plane to Kuala Lumpur and from KL to Ho Chi Minn City, to find out I was in the wrong country altogether and Kim had left by then and no one knew where. It was my job to find out where and so I did, but it took me two days and then I was on a private helicopter going over Laos and into the badlands.

Kim, I only found out later, was about to declare herself independent. She and her followers had acquired land that straddled the borders of Laos, Thailand and the country that was variously known as Myanmar or Burma. The intersection used to be called the Golden Triangle and it was, literally, a dump.

Over the years, various factions in South East Asia found it useful to dump unwanted things into the forests of the badlands. Discarded Vietnamese battle dolls; Thai war drones that refused to shut themselves down and lived in complicated social flocks; Chinese nanogoo that never quite worked the way it was supposed to; in other words, crap. The drug trade was out ever since opium production for medical purposes was authorised for the entire region (previously almost the sole domain of India and Tasmania) by the UN, and the former heroin labs were abandoned and moved to new industrial cities where the offices were much better. *Newsweek* called it The Mor-

phine Revolution in a cover story and then everyone did a good job of forgetting the whole thing ever took place. The first thing Kim said to me was: "I don't need protection."

"With all due respect," I said, "your advisors disagree."

"My advisors know shit."

I could see why it was easy to fall in love with her. She was born a boy, was a popular boxer in her teen years, had the operation, stayed a popular boxer for a couple more years, branched into films, a brief pop career, and then came her revelation and before you knew it there were Temples of Kim in every major city on the continent and the North Americans were begging to be allowed to join. "I was hired to guard you," I said.

"I can take care of myself."

"With all due respect," I said again, and she smiled, and said, "That just means you do not *have* respect."

"I have a *job*," I said. She nodded, once. "Fine. Just don't get in my fucking way."

She had a way with words, Kim did. The first tenet of the Book of Kim says: *Do not fuck up*. The second tenet is: *If you do, hide the evidence*.

So I did my job.



THERE WAS NOTHING to do but watch American wrestling, which was still live. The whole camp felt as if it were waiting for something, and I worried it might be another rapture. There was shit in jungles. I installed perimeter defences, sent out bat-scouts to fly and report back, anti-missile weaponry, a firewall. Kim had surprisingly wide bandwidth going into her camp and I didn't know what she did with it. Every day followers would come. Some came by car, some on foot, some arrived in helicopters. I didn't see the woman who hired me though I sent her daily reports. My people tried to be unobtrusive, and they were good at that, but still. I was getting edgier by the day, knowing I wasn't being paid the amount I was getting to sit around watching the two hundredth and twenty-second reincarnation of the Undertaker fight in the ring. I didn't even know where the threat would come from. It didn't seem reasonable that another Spiritual Entity or various faction groups were in the area – and I checked, and there weren't. And the other SEs all had their own insurance policies anyway. We regulated the industry quite well, and there hadn't been a major SE war in a long time.

But Kim was obviously expecting trouble of some sort, and so I worried and checked the defences and the news networks and stuck close to Kim, and I was with her when she went into the forest.

KIM WAS THE name she chose for herself when she became a player, because it had a nice all-American girl's name ring to it. Call it alien, call it SE, call it what you will but sometimes it is as if the old entity had been cast off, a new one taken its place. Rumour is that it happened that way with Ogko but no one really ever understood Ogko properly. I had been a follower of Ogko for a while (a lot of people are, when they're young) and I never understood it either.

Kim was different. She swore a lot and she drank and she watched American wrestling and she was very much – alive, I guess is the word I'd use. She wasn't very holy, but then neither were Elvis or Geller or Ogko. I followed her into the jungle.

She had decided to go on her own. I said, "You can't do that."

"I can do whatever the fuck I want."

"I will come with you."

She only shrugged. "Whatever," she said.

We left the camp. I had arranged for the bat-drones to go discretely ahead and for some of my people to follow us at a distance. Kim didn't seem to mind. I should have sensed trouble. I didn't.

MY FIRST SIGN of things going wrong came when the feed from the bat-drones turned into static. Then there were some wet explosions behind us and I panicked. Kim seemed oblivious to the whole thing. She sat in the lotus position, eyes closed, breathing deeply and evenly. I built a hasty setup of motion mines around her and doubled back.

My team was gone.

I found the remains of one, an ex-Swiss Guard, spread out across several thick-trunked trees. There was a silence in the forest that was unsettling. It was impossible to see the skies through the canopy, had been for some time, and I felt trapped inside that net of growing trees, oppressed by the heat and the humidity and the insects and the knowledge someone had just

eliminated my team. I went back and Kim was still sitting there, meditating or asleep or doing fuck knows what. I didn't disable the mines. I said, "Kim, we have a problem."

She didn't even open her eyes. She murmured, "No, you have a problem."

There is a long distinguished protocol for SE to go off into a wilderness and there achieve some sort of new equilibrium. Ogko was inspired by the death of a backpacker who drowned in the Mekong (in *The Way of Ogko*). Jesus went into the desert (in *The New Testament*). Geller went into the jungle (in *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me out of Here!*). I said, "Kim, did you wipe out my team?"

She didn't answer, but I knew it wasn't impossible.

WHEN SHE SURFACED she didn't say a word to me, just shouldered her backpack and kept walking. I followed. I worried about an external agency. Someone killed my people. Someone disabled the drones. Someone was out there and I had the suspicion Kim had gone out into the jungle to meet them.

If I was being honest, I was afraid of aliens.

I DON'T SUBSCRIBE to the AToSE. There has been no evidence of alien intelligences on Earth, nor of any radically new theory that would allow them to break the speed of light. If there were aliens they were a long way away, on their own alien planets, worrying about their own alien politics, their own crazy SEs. The problem, though, was that it depended on your definition of aliens.

THERE WERE THINGS in the jungle that shouldn't have been there. Kim seemed strangely immune to them. I wasn't. The first came when a tree tried to kill me. We were passing through a coconut grove when they began to fall down. Coconuts fall silently, but usually as long as you're aware of the danger you can avoid it. This, however, was not a single coconut dropping, but a bombardment. The trees stretched above my head and, as they did, their trunks bending like the necks of giraffes, they dropped their fruit directly above me. Kim walked calmly ahead. I began to run and the coconut trees stretched to follow me, massive green coconuts falling in absolute silence, narrowly missing my head, exploding at my feet. As I ran a tree root tripped me up. I turned on my back and stared directly at the falling load and knew it would burst my brain open and that would be the end of that. I felt strangely calm about it. The air smelled very thick with fragrance, there had been strange little white flowers growing all over this region. The coconuts seemed to fall in slow motion, cannonballs or daisy-cutters dropped from a great height.

Kim saved my life. It was perhaps at that point that madness set in.

WHAT DOES IT mean to be mad? Were the SEs, all throughout the age, mad themselves? Perhaps madness is seeing the world in a different light, perhaps it is seeing things that are not there. But how much more crazy is it when they can then transfer their vision of the world, this stream of skewered, alien data, from themselves into other people?

The coconuts slowed in mid-air. They hovered above my head, ready to fall down and smash it, ready to cave-in my skull, destroy neural pathways, erase the entity that thought of itself,

collectively, as I. They never did. They hovered in the air and then Kim came closer and batted two of them aside – I heard them hit the ground with a thud and roll to a standstill – held the third one with her palm upturned, reached with her other hand and gently split it open. I stood up. The ground was covered with green coconuts like rolled heads. “Come,” Kim said. “Look.”

I looked. I couldn’t help it. She had split open the coconut as if it were made of something soft and pliable and she showed me its inside.

There was a tiny living-room in there.

Table, chairs. An old-fashioned TV of a defunct Japanese make. Tiny cups and saucers on the table. A fireplace. “No one in,” Kim said, sounding sad. I stared at her, stared at the open coconut. “What are you doing to me?” I said, or thought I did. She said, “Come on.” She let go of the coconut and, like in one of those magic tricks that use invisible thread, it stayed suspended in the air. I reached out and touched it. The moment I did it fell to the ground. Kim said, “Come on,” and started walking again. I stared at the coconuts lying on the ground, wondering what each of them hid inside. Then I followed Kim, deeper into the forest.

How do I describe that journey into the forest? One could never see the sun beyond the canopy. Things slithered and crawled on the ground where the mulch of dead leaves, branches and roots had its own odour, its own separate life. How do I describe my certainty that the trees were watching me, that unseen assailants were lying in wait, that things would end up badly?

My people had died. I walked like Lear, alone and crazy. I was a tow-boat and Kim was my anchor, but an anchor to what? She made me see things her way.

I don’t know how long we travelled in that region. The first night we camped in a clearing. I built a fire while Kim stared off into space. I began to hear voices. They came from nowhere. They spoke in a multitude of languages. It was like being tuned in at once to a thousand audio channels. Kim seemed to be listening for them too. Occasionally she would seem to reply. At some point the ground shook. Kim had slowly turned around to the source of the quake. I watched her. The ground shook and something came out of the ground. It was a dull-grey, earth-brown creature. It shook and shivered as it climbed from its hole. It took me a moment to recognise it. A semi-autonomous mine-layer, of an old Vietnamese make. Kim called to it and the machine crawled towards her, and she slowly stroked its head, murmuring to it. After a moment the thing turned back, its snout pointing at the ground, and began to dig. Soon it was gone back into the earth.

“What are we doing here, Kim?”

She smiled. “We are going,” she said, “on a journey.”

“No shit.”

“Language, Mr Turner.” Then she turned to me and the smile melted away and she said, “What is your name?”

“James,” I said. “James Turner.”

She shrugged. “I have no doubt you used some extremely

clever algorithm to come up with that name,” she said. “However, it won’t serve you very well in this place.”

We use names like shields. We use names to blend in. I tried to remember my original name and couldn’t. I said, “What is your name, Kim?”

“I have no name,” she said. “Not here. One must be honest, here.”

“Then I shall have no name either,” I said. “In the interest of honesty.”

She smiled at that. “Good,” she said.

Why did I have the feeling she had trapped me then?

I knew then that the insurance contract had been a scam. I had been set up, hired for something I was not prepared for. She did not need my protection – I needed her. And yet...

I said, “Where are we going?”

She said, “To the place where names begin.”

WE CAME TO an open area where the forest had been pushed back. There were banana trees here and wild drones flying overhead in formation. I watched them hunt, firing tiny missiles at an animal running through the trees. I watched them sit motionless in the sun, recharging. Kim called to them and they flew to her and one perched on her hand. There were too many deadly things in this place and they all came to Kim. With the exception of the trees before, they ignored me. We walked in the open and I was grateful for the sun. Then we went back into the trees.



THE ATTACK CAME at night. I had been stumbling after Kim. It was very dark, and there were noises in the forest. I no longer knew where I was, what my name had been, I knew nothing but Kim, but she was no longer there. Something erupted from the trees and slammed into me. I fell back and

it was on top of me. I grappled with it. It felt alive, though there was metal there too. I could not see it. My breathing was very loud to myself. I punched and tried to roll away but it had me pinned down and I used a miniature device, a pen-like delivery system that went like a blade into the thing’s flesh and embedded a tiny explosive charge. I pushed and flailed but it wouldn’t leave and then it exploded above me, burning my skin, covering me with blood and bones and metal.

Kim came to me then. “It was a bear,” she said. “A half-mech. It must have been lonely.”

They’d been bred – manufactured – for jungle warfare. I didn’t reply. “We must be getting close,” she said.

We were.

We came at last to a clearing in the forest. It was if the trees had simply uprooted themselves and retreated further from the spot, creating a perfectly circular space. A full moon shone overhead and in its light I saw him.

THEY ARE NOT like you and me.

I RECOGNISED HIM, of course, the boy in the moonlight. His feet

were bare, the nails of his fingers ruined where he bit them. Skin like ground Blue Mountain coffee, eyes as innocent as a baby's. I had seen him numerous times, but never in the flesh. He began as a poet, and at some point he started to perform his poetry, not in any formal way but spontaneously, in roadside cafés and waiting rooms and train stations, and people began to listen. He was SE, one of the great SEs, and he should have been nowhere near this place, and yet he was.

He said, "There is no longer a Nash Equilibrium."

Kim said, "This place is mine."

The boy smiled. "Is this your champion?" he said.

Kim said, "He will do."

I realised they were discussing me. I sat on the ground, stilled my breath. I thought about the tiny living-room inside the coconut. Perhaps all living-rooms exist, *in potentia*, inside coconuts. A Nash Equilibrium is when all the players follow their best strategy and will only lose out if they change it.

The boy said, "This is not a theme park."

"Do you understand what is here?" Kim said.

The boy smiled again. "Do you?" he said.

I began to hear voices again. They were not in my head – not exactly. Something had congealed in this part of the world. Discarded technology, discarded ideas – they did not die but evolved, and finally meshed – became something new, something alien. The voices whispered in my head and the boy smiled and he had a nice smile. I had nothing to do with this, I realised. This was between SEs, a secret war of control. This place was a spiritual resource, and these two both wanted it.

The boy made a motion with his hand. A figure stepped into the moonlight.

"Bradford?" I said.

He looked at me. He could have been my twin. We were both so carefully tailor-made to be what we were. "Turner?"

"Well, this is fucking touching," Kim said.

"Fucking touching," the boy said. He laughed. He had a laugh like breaking glass.

Brad was an insurance agent. I said, "What happened to your team?"

"They were taken out."

He looked rough. He mirrored me.

"There were things in the coconuts," I said. "There was this living-room."

He said, "There was a cave. There were winds living there. Localised tornadoes, sentient. They showed me..." His voice was husky from disuse. He said, "There was a crab with a top hat that could talk."

"The crab or the top hat?" I said. He shook his head.

"You will have to decide this," Kim said. She motioned for me and I obeyed her. I stood up. Bradford did the same his side. We faced each other in that perfect circle of trees. I could sense the silent watchers around the circle: wild drones and mech-bears and mine-layers and trees and wind. I knew Brad could feel them too. I landed the first punch.

LIFE, OGKO SAYS, is like a river. It is a metaphor, he goes on to say, and not a particularly good one. Nevertheless.

We could use road, says Ogko, but a road is a created thing, while a river exists independently of humanity. The river can

be turbulent or quiet. It can be calm and smooth and clear – or rough and full of turmoil. Though the river is infinite, individual journeys across it are finite. Lives sail the river for infinitely small stretches. Human lives are like tiny craft sailing the river. They are like canoes. They are organic, like the trees from which canoes are made. They are born of the natural complexity of the world and, like great complexity, they can appear very simple.

We fought. We were both very good at it, and neither of us wanted to fall into the river.

And yet... I understood, at that moment, that the battle being waged was bigger than a single life, human or otherwise. It was about reclaiming, for one side or the other, a wider stretch of river. I did not know why. But at least, for the first time, I knew why I was being paid.

THEY MADE LOVE as we fought. Kim and the singer, naked in the moonlight. At one point I took Bradford's eye out. Later, he had broken my knee. I knew then that we were not truly fighting, but re-enacting something primeval. The wheel of love and the wheel of violence turned like clockwork against each other, and slowly, slowly, the silent watchers came. The boy sang then, as I tore Brad's ear off with my teeth, as he sank his thumb into my neck until blood spurted out, and Kim spoke, and they *were*, and the jungle came to them and they claimed it. I know what happened but I do not understand it.

Much later it was daylight and Brad and I were lying on the ground and there were roots holding us down and strange creatures lapping at our wounds and Kim said, "Hush, now. It is over." I could hear helicopters in the distance, thought I was hallucinating.

"Fighting and fucking," Kim said, close in my ear. "Ogko never understood that about life."

They had needed a show and we provided it. The helicopters landed and Brad and I were loaded onto them. They took us to the clinics in Yunnan and rebuilt us.

SIX MONTHS LATER I was in a bar in Mexico City watching the Ali-Tyson fight when she walked in. I'd been reading the papers: Singularity terrorists in South America, industrial strikes in the Belt, the appearance of a blackout area in South East Asia, a slice of Earth sunk into maplessness, a Here Be Dragons because one no longer knew what was really there. I'd been there and I didn't know.

Something alien...

SEs change things. History is like a river, and human lives are rafts or leaves or corpses floating in it for a while. So said Ogko. But sometimes lives flare brightly, like an explosion, a seismic shift. SEs are history bombs, shifting the courses of rivers, causing floods or watering a desert. It's hard to say which. I wondered what would come out of that place, what beast, its time come at last, as Yeats had said, would be shambling towards Bethlehem to be born. Or towards Ho Chi Minh City or Kunming or Chiang Mai, at least.

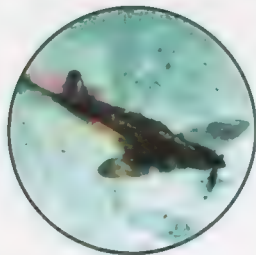
I turned off the news feed and she came towards me, smart suit, smart shades, Oxford accent – she smiled when she saw me and said, "I would like to buy some insurance."

"That's lucky," I said. "That happens to be what I do."

She nodded and sat down, and I let her pay for the drinks. ■



PATRICK SAMPHIRE CAMELOT



WHEN SHE FINDS ME, I'M HALF-SITTING, HALF-SLOUCHED, butt propped against the bonnet of my chunky old Volvo estate, shoulders hunched, flicking away madly at my fifty pence lighter, roll-up hanging from my mouth, boots still unlaced. Dignified, right? But sometimes the need takes you, and it doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing, and there's nothing you can do about it.

I need a fag, and that's that.

And, let's face it, it's not like it's going to kill me.

The bonnet is still hot under my arse, and that's something to be grateful for, because today's bitch cold. The Volvo's heater broke weeks ago, and I haven't a clue how to fix it. My bones hurt.

I finally coax a flame out of the lighter. I take a drag and feel the smoke burn its way down into my lungs. Now that's what I call central heating. I'd say it's better than sex, but to be honest, it's been so long since the latter that I can't remember.

When I open my eyes, a whole coach load of fucking Japanese tourists have drawn up and are piling out, right into my view. Fantastic.

It's while I'm watching them that she sidles up to me. Must have come from the other end of the car, because the first I know of it, she's taking the fag out of my fingers and lighting one of her own with the end. She returns mine with a half shrug – very Gallic – then settles beside me.

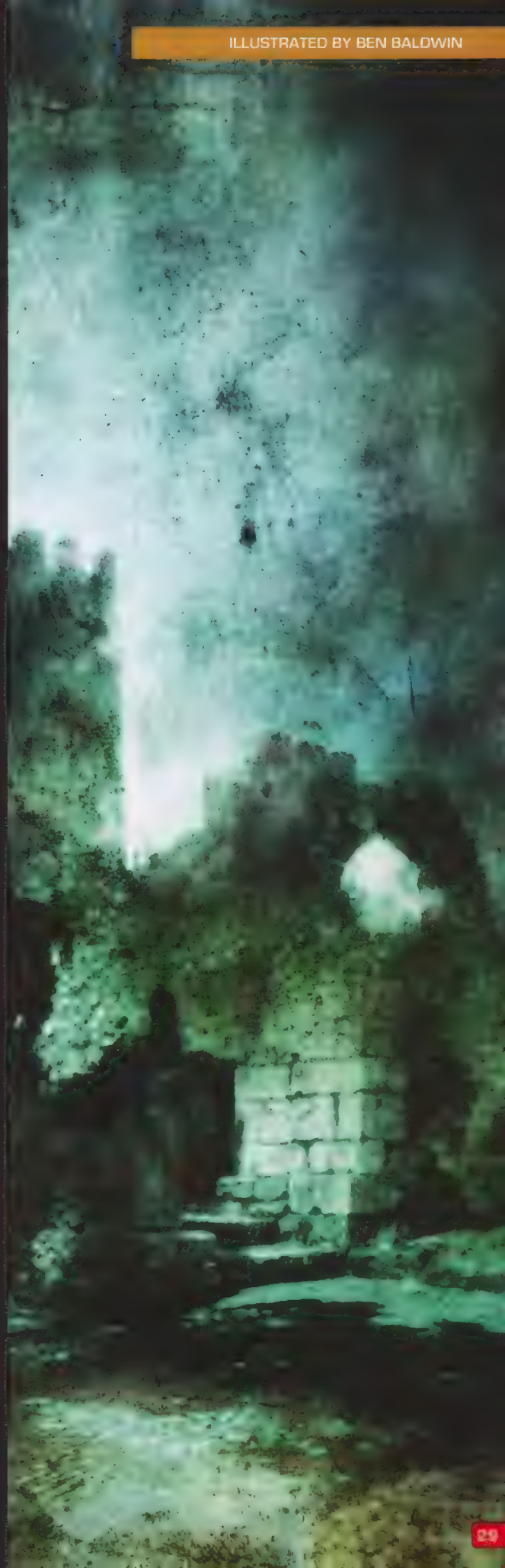
"It never is," she says.

Which is a funny fucking opening gambit, if you ask me. If it's supposed to be a come-on, it's not exactly 'do you come here often'. But, to be honest, she doesn't exactly need the lines. She's gorgeous. Hair as black as burnt wood and cascading to the small of her back, which in turn sends the eyes you know where, and once I'm there, well, I'm not looking away in a hurry.

"Isn't what?" I say, eyes still firmly where they shouldn't be.

"Camelot," she says. "It's never Camelot." She waves the cigarette at the ruins that rise on the hill above us, leaving an elegant trace of smoke in the air.

She turns to look at me for the first time and I get the full effect of her eyes. They're almost as dark as her hair, and they near-as-fuck knock me out of my unlaced boots. I've never seen eyes like them before. My heart's hammering away like a teenager with a skin mag.



"That's what you're looking for, isn't it?" she says. "Camelot?"
 "No," I say. "I'm looking for my brother."
 She nods, like it explains everything.
 "What happened to him?"

"He disappeared." Which is true as far as it goes. There are just a couple of details I leave out. Like, my brother was shot down over France in 1943. Like, I was twenty-two years old.

Like, I've been looking for him ever since.

Like, it's 2010 now, and I haven't aged a single day.

"Camelot," she says. "It's never Camelot."

There are things you long for. Things you need with the strength of a black hole some bastard's opened in your chest. Things you can't leave be because you'd die if you did.

I finish my roll-up with one deep suck and grind out what's left under my foot.

"I'm going to take a look."

"Fine," she says. "I'm coming."

I don't say no.

I've seen it in my dreams. The place Jack came down. I've seen weed-strewn ruins, high arches of stone, glittering glass hanging in shattered windows. I've seen fountains and a river that wells up from deep beneath the ruins to run over carved reliefs. I've seen statues and fluttering flags standing forlorn over crumbled walls. I've seen Jack lying there, his parachute crumpled behind him, his face twisted with pain, his leg bent back at an impossible angle. I've seen the cold sunlight overhead and heard the wind snatching at the stones. I'll know it the moment I see it.

This isn't it.

I didn't think it would be. After all these years, I don't expect to find that place, but I can't stop looking. It's got to be out there somewhere.

Jack fell from the sky. I can't leave him.

The Japanese tourists are all over these ruins, taking shots, laughing, talking. Steam rises from their lips, wreathing their heads like they're dragons at the fucking monsters' ball.

This is not it. I can't help but feel disappointed. You'd have thought after all this time, I'd have grown immune.

"I've got a room," she says. "Back in the village. Nothing special, but..."

I shrug. Anything's better than another night in the back of the Volvo, with ice on the inside of the windows and a crick in my neck that'll take all day to loosen.

"Sounds good."

That night, after the wine, after we've fucked, after I've stared into her eyes like into twin wells filled with ink, she shifts herself out from under me.

She gazes up at me from the darkness. "How old do you think I am?"

Trust me, there's no right answer to that. "About thirty," I say, trying to be honest.

She smiles. "Sweet boy."

"You want to know how old I am?" I say, suddenly irritated. "I'm eighty fucking nine."

Her smile widens. "You're far older than that, Sam."

As I slip into sleep, she whispers, "You're not supposed to remember. None of us are."

In the morning, she's gone, leaving only the scent of olives

behind her.

I never told her my name.

A bit of that old poem flits through my brain. You know the one. "I did but see her passing by, and yet I love her till I die."

I did but fuck her passing by...

Doesn't quite have the same ring to it. It's true, though. I feel like she's set my blood on fire. It's pumping through my veins with a searing pain that grows with every beat of my heart.

I'm sweating. My sheets are soaked. The hairs on my skin are standing painfully on end, and every time I brush against the cotton, it hurts like a razor cut. I'm shivering. I feel hot and cold at the same time.

Fuck. She's done something to me.

I stumble out of bed and fall, my knees crashing on the floor. The room is spinning around me. I squeeze my eyes shut and scrabble around for my clothes. I can only find one sock and my T-shirt has completely disappeared. Gritting my teeth, I dress.

I stagger to the door, crashing it open with my shoulder and almost tripping down the stairs. I hug my coat around me.

The innkeeper gabbles something at me in French. I ignore him and lurch out into the freezing morning. The light is blinding, even with my eyes almost squeezed shut.

The innkeeper follows me out, still spouting gibberish.

My car is in the lot. I reach it, wrench open the door, and slump down in the driver's seat. My head falls forward, smacking into the steering wheel. Distantly, I hear a blaring sound, but my head is swirling worse than ever.

The fever dream comes then, eddying up from behind my eyelids. I see fire and smoke, burning buildings and shattered walls. All around me, heavily armoured men clash and fall. Sweat and blood and mud make everything slippery. A shape looms before me, and I swing. The shape goes down before I can see a face. I step over, shield raised.

The men around me break into a run, racing towards the enormous, burning buildings ahead of us. The last of the defenders fall and flee. The inferno rages with a fierce joy, ripping and tearing and laughing in its hunger. The heat beats on metal. Armour and swords reflect orange and red. We're shouting in triumph, beating swords against shields.

That's when they come, walking through the fire. The old man and the young.

Our cheers die in our mouths.

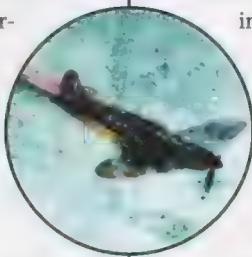
The man beside me turns, screaming back to someone I can't see. "You said they were gone! You said they wouldn't be here!"

Then men are breaking, running, fleeing. I stand for a moment as the figures approach through the fire. Then I'm running too, my shield forgotten behind me.

I don't know how long I've sat there in the car. Long enough that my sweat has chilled nearly to ice. The fire that burned in me has faded, and the shivering is just because I'm freezing. The fever is gone.

I fumble out my keys and turn on the engine. There's frost on the windscreen. I should get out and scrape it off, but I don't have the strength. Instead, I start the car rolling forwards, squinting through the tiny patch of clear glass.

Futilely, I worry the little heating lever back and forward on the dashboard. Something clicks, and miraculously, a thin



trickle of warm air washes over me. I want to cry.

I pull out my little notebook, still peering through the frosted windscreen, and flick through the pages. I glance down and read the next name on the list. *Château de Najac*. It's a fair drive. Not that I expect to find anything there. I've seen photos. But there are only so many options left, and I can't afford to ignore any of them. Jack wouldn't have.

Jack might have been my little brother, but he was the one who always looked out for me. He only joined the RAF so he could keep an eye on me. So I wouldn't get myself killed doing something stupid. Then they shot him down, and he fell, and he was only twenty-one.

He was the same when we were kids. I lost track of how many times he dragged me out of ponds or caught me before I could tumble down some embankment.

Now he's lost, and the irony is, I can't die. I can't even grow old.

When he needed to be caught, I wasn't there. I was in a bar. With a couple of girls. Drunk.

They had to wait to the next day to tell me, when I was sober, but by then I'd already had the first dream of Jack lying in the ruins, and I knew he wasn't dead. He was waiting for me to save him.

Château de Najac stands on a craggy outcropping of rock over a painfully cute village. The kind of place that too-rich English bastards infest like a case of the crabs. Darling, it's so *authentic*.

I climb out of the Volvo.

This isn't the right place. I know it. It's not even close. Jack wouldn't even have been flying this far south.

A cold wind whips shreds of snow up from the valley. They scratch and melt on my bare face.

I don't remember when I last ate.

"It never is," she says, just behind me.

"Screw you," I say, somehow not surprised that she's here.

"You already did."

I glance back at her. She's showing a slight smile. She takes my breath away, just like she did yesterday. This woman is so beautiful.

"You can't find it like this," she says. "You can't just walk into Camelot."

My hands bunch into fists, cold fingers feeling like dead chunks of wood against my palms. "I'm not interested in fucking Camelot. I just want my brother."

"Jack," she says.

"How do you know his name?"

"It's not his real name, you know," she says. "Just like Sam's not your real name."

I shake my head, turning away.

In bed that night, she says again, "You're not supposed to remember."

"Remember what?" I demand.

"Who you are," she says. "What you did. They took that from us, from those cast out. We fell from grace."

I shake my head, but already sleep is claiming me, and in the morning she's gone.

The fever hits me again on the way to the car, but this time I'm

half expecting it. I've got my keys in my hand, and I make it to the car without falling.

The fever dream is more real this time. More visceral. I can feel the sweat on my back and taste metal-tinged blood in my mouth. Heat from the flames beats against my armour and my exposed skin. My eyes are dry and they sting. The armour has rubbed me raw beneath my arms and at my neck. Metal clashes around me. I block a swinging sword, and the impact judders down my arm, numbing my wrist.

When the defenders break, I scream, "No! Don't follow!" But this is a fever dream, and I am not in control. No sounds pass my lips, and I run forward with the other attackers, screaming triumph.

I feel the biting fear as the two men come striding through the flames.

"You said they were gone! You said they wouldn't be here!" the man behind me shouts, just before we flee.

I turn and run, racing back across flagstones I fought bitterly to take only minutes before. *She* is there, standing with back pressed against the stone wall, hands folded in front of her as though she's sitting in her solar, talking to her ladies. But I see the fear in her eyes too.

I don't have time to think. The young one, the one carrying the sword, is on us already. Men fall, cut down.

There is no way out of this courtyard. A burning beam has fallen across the gate. When it happened, I was delighted. *No reinforcements.*

I swing back in time to see *him* cut down another man without breaking step. There are scarcely a dozen of us left standing, fanned out before the blocked gate.

I look into that face that I once loved more than I loved my own life. But the killing rage is upon him, and there is no mercy in his eyes.

I raise my sword. At least it will be quick.

Then Jack comes stumbling from around the burning stables. He isn't wearing armour. He never joined us. I never told him what we were planning to do, because I knew that if I did, he would follow me, and this was never Jack's fight.

Jack was the only one who could ever talk to *him* during one of his killing rages. Now Jack pleads, cajoles, reasons, begs, while the rest of us stand there, waiting for the end.

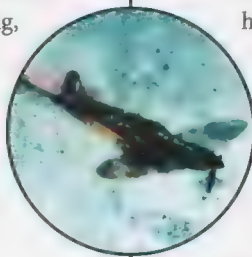
But slowly the killing rage fades in *his* eyes. Hardness remains, but it is the hardness of reason and justice, not of rage. I know Jack has saved me once more.

Then the old one speaks. His words chill the air. Darkness gathers like thunder, oppressive, heavy, painful. A fear grips me that is so great that it stops the blood in my veins. I do not understand most of the words. They are too powerful, too... potent. In my terror the only words I catch are, *Cast out, for all time.*

Then comes the fall.

I wake sweating. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tight that they've left dents in the hard plastic. I'm shaking. Despite my thick clothes, I'm chilled through. I fumble out a roll-up. Thank God I made it last night, because right now I can hardly hold it.

When it's lit, I turn on the engine. The petrol indicator is close to empty, and so is my wallet. I reckon I've got enough for an-



other two tanks, then I'm broke. I'll have to get a job, save some more up, before I can start looking again. Could take months. I hammer my cold fists on the steering wheel. It's been over sixty years. Jack is out there, lost, hurt. I can't bear to give up again.

I consult my notebook and my map. Then I turn the car north.

The drive takes most of the day. The frost-rimed landscape of southern France slips by, an unending sequence of towns and villages, fields, forests and mountains. Eventually, though, I catch sight of my destination, high, ruined walls against a fading sky.

It's not the place I'm looking for.

"It never is," she says.

That night, instead of making love, she sings to me. It's the saddest song I have ever heard.

"Find him," she whispers, when she's done.

In the morning, she's gone again, but there is no fever dream.

Next stop is Calais, then the ferry home. If I'm careful, I can make enough in three or four months to set out again. There are plenty more ruins in France. If they fail me, I'll try Belgium. Jack could have been blown off course. He might not have been shot down over France. I won't stop. Jack wouldn't have.

It's late afternoon and the sky is fading to a wintery lilac when I catch a glimpse of something through the cold-stripped trees. It's just a flash of stone, but old instincts take over, and I slam on the brakes. In summer, I wouldn't have seen a thing.

I consult my map, but there's nothing marked.

It's probably just a tumbledown farmhouse. I'm going to be driving all night as it is. I'm tempted to keep driving.

Instead, I climb out, pull on my walking boots, and crunch my way up the slope, through the trees.

I have dreamt this place so many times. The weed-strewn ruins, the high arches of stone, the glass still hanging in shattered windows. There is the fountain, empty of water now, but familiar still. Here is the small river that wells up from deep beneath the ruins to run over reliefs. I peer through the icy water and see knights carved from stone. Broken statues line the track to the courtyard. There are no flags on the walls, but my dream is of sixty-seven years ago. Things change.

I tramp towards the courtyard. Two statues stand on either side of the gate. I recognise them from my fever dream and look quickly away.

This time, I hear her footsteps before she reaches me. Her face is flushed from the climb in the freezing air, but she is still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Just looking at her makes it hard to breathe. There's another car parked behind mine on the road, a low black Ferrari.

"You've been following me," I say.

"You're a slow driver."

I shrug. "Is this it?" I say. "Is this Camelot?"

"No," she says. "But it's close. It's very close."

I make my way into the courtyard. In my dreams, Jack comes down on the far side, in the shade of the great wall. His parachute stretches across the flagstones behind him.

Here, now, the accumulated leaves of a dozen years have blown in undisturbed drifts.

When I close my eyes, I can see exactly where he should be

lying.

I kneel in the rotting, frost-crisped leaves and dig through them.

The first thing I find is a buckle, still glinting despite the grime. As I move more leaves, I uncover a rotting RAF uniform, then bones. The left femur has snapped and the rest of the leg juts backwards.

My hands won't uncover any more. They tremble uselessly at my side. There's an emptiness pressing against my throat, so deep that I can't even cry or scream or shout.

I cannot die. I thought the same would be true for Jack. I thought he'd be waiting for me. I never imagined he would die here in this cold, empty courtyard, alone and undiscovered.

Jack never failed me in all our years. I've failed him now.

The woman pushes me aside with a strength I would not have guessed. Her face is full of delight. I stare at her. She runs her hands over Jack's bones, then looks up at me, her eyes alight with joy.

I can't speak.

"We were cast out," she says. "You, me and all the others. We fell. All of us except Jack. Jack followed you, like he always did. He was not banished. Don't you understand? His bones can carry us home."

I look at her with revulsion. "That's all you wanted? All of this was so that I could lead you to Jack and you could go home?"

"To Camelot," she says. "We both could. Your brother would want you to."

The truth is, she is right. Jack would do anything for me. He wanted to make me happy and keep me safe. He *would* want me to go home.

"Who were we?" I say. "Back in Camelot, what were our real names?"

She smiles. "Follow me and find out."

I shake my head. Without Jack, there's nothing for me there. There's nothing for me anywhere.

"You'll forget," she says. "These memories will fade, like they did before. You won't have another chance."

I don't care. I *want* them to fade.

This isn't Jack. It can't be. Not dead in this bleak, lost place. Not Jack. Not my brother.

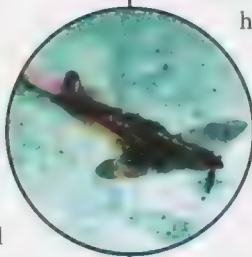
I leave her there, this woman, kneeling over the bones of the British airman.

That night, I dream of Jack lying, leg broken, in the ruins. I dream of fountains and a river running over carved stone and bright glass in shattered windows. I dream of flags fluttering over high walls.

In the morning, I get into my Volvo and continue to drive north.

There are other ruins. Perhaps I was wrong about these ones. After all, there were no flags fluttering over the walls.

The Volvo's engine is making an unhealthy noise, and the heater is broken again. I keep driving.



> Patrick Sampire has published stories in Interzone, Black Static, Realms of Fantasy and Year's Best Fantasy. He lives in Wales with his wife, Stephanie Burgis, their son and their dog. You can read all his other published stories via his website at patricksamphire.com.

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THE

NINA ALLAN

I REMEMBER A CONVERSATION I HAD WITH HIM ONCE, AT the private view for his first major commercial show.

"What would you say was the difference between a spy and a secret agent?"

"What are you talking about?" I said. "There is no difference, surely?"

"Perhaps not," he said. "But did you ever hear of anyone being shot as a secret agent?"

He had this idea that although in theory the words shared a meaning, in practice the term secret agent made you think glamour and heroics whereas spy was a dirty word with connotations of treachery. He reckoned it was a put-up job, that your role was decided for you by whoever got to write the history books.

"Think about it," he said. "That Melita Norwood woman was branded a spy, but James Bond has always been a secret agent."

It didn't seem to occur to him that James Bond didn't exist. I asked him what the big deal was, but he'd gone all deadpan on me. Niko was a pain like that sometimes. He had this habit of holding forth on heavy subjects, and once he got into his stride there was no stopping him. Try to make a joke and it was like walking on eggshells.

"You wouldn't be asking that question if it was you facing the firing squad," he said.

We were standing in front of a painting of his called *The Tower*. It was typical of his stuff back then: when you stood away from it it was like looking at an abstract mass of colours but if you looked at it up close it was a lot more complicated. There were all these tiny squares, painted one above the other like a giant stack of matchboxes. In each box there was a different object: a pink plastic radio, a Princess Diana mug, a Barbie doll with only one arm, the kind of old rubbish you find stuffed away in the attic or in the cupboard under the stairs. When I asked him what the things were supposed to have in common he wouldn't say.

Some of the critics reckoned it had to do with the Tower of Babel, that the disconnected images were symbolic of a lack of understanding between people or nations or whatever. As far as I was concerned the theory didn't hold water because although they had different titles all of Niko's paintings looked the same.

Time Machine, *Fortress*, *Meridian* – whatever the paintings meant the show sold out. People didn't seem to mind that his work was weird. They called it playful or ironic. I saw one newspaper review where the journo in question had described it as having 'all the freshness and vitality of a particularly well-drawn comic strip'. Whenever Niko was interviewed he was asked to spill the beans on what the pictures were supposed to mean but

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UPSTAIRS WINDOW

he always refused. He said the meaning of any painting always depended on who was looking at it. I've never had time for that kind of talk and I didn't pay it much attention. Niko was doing all right back then, whatever the paintings meant.

I admired him and I liked his work. What I hated was what went with it, the trappings, the bullshit, all that art world hype. As far as I'm concerned good journalism is all about saying what you mean in as few words as possible. Arts journalism often seems to be the exact opposite.

We never really discussed Laura Plantagenet, and in any case my friendship with Niko was purely a coincidence. We met more than a year after Laura and I split up and it certainly wasn't Laura that introduced us. I think Niko understood her even less than I did. The mistake we all make with beautiful people is to expect them to be something more than the sum of their parts.

I can't remember whether it was me or Laura who first suggested we get married. Whoever it was we were a disaster waiting to happen. But because of the Angola brief and the film that came out of it I was seen as a name in the making and I even had the money to go with it. What with her beauty and my success people must have thought we were the perfect match.

After Laura I stayed single. I don't mean I didn't have women. I was even serious about some of them. I just made a deal with myself never to try and live with one again. Work and women don't mix. When I come back off a job I'm exhausted. Sometimes I'm not fit for human company. I like to unpack my kit, junk the worst of it, steam-clean the rest, lie in the bath for hours just listening to the pipes grumble. I like to enjoy the sensation of feeling safe. Sometimes, in London, I used to ask myself whether I did what I did precisely because there was always that illusion of safety at the end of it. That was rubbish of course, it was simply the tiredness talking. If all I'd wanted was some uninterrupted downtime I'd have found a job that was less likely to get me killed.

It was during one of these furloughs that Niko turned up at my flat. To tell you the truth I hadn't expected to see him again. He'd made a mistake, and a bad one. Such actions have inevitable results. I mistrust idealism. I've seen enough of it in practice to know that it's rarely about the other man. You might even call it the ultimate expression of arrogance and whatever it is it isn't worth dying for. It was eight months since I'd seen him and he looked awful. He stank like he hadn't washed for days and there was an ugly cut just below his right eye that had only partially healed. I wondered if he'd been beaten up while in police custody but it turned out he'd got himself into a fight in some pub in Soho. Looking at it made me feel tired. It was one stupid thing after another with him.

I'd kept abreast of the case, of course – his girlfriend Mica had emailed me all the press cuttings – but I was in Kuwait while it was actually going on and pleased to be there. I didn't want to get mixed up in it, least of all as a witness. Mud sticks. The last thing I needed was to draw the wrong kind of attention to

myself. A journalist who draws the wrong kind of attention to himself soon finds that his sources begin to dry up. For all his talk of spies and secret agents Niko never seemed to grasp that.

I wondered if I'd be able to lie convincingly enough to tell him he couldn't stay.

"You'd better come in," I said. "Let me pour you a drink." I reasoned I could let him have a couple of hours' sleep and then tell him I had a plane to catch.

"A drink would be great," he said. His arms were limp at his sides, and I noticed he had some kind of grime under his fingernails. It looked like motor oil. I wondered what it had been that had finally made him begin to give up on himself: the threat of execution, the crap they printed in the newspapers, or the public destruction of most of his works. I poured him a Scotch. He held the glass up to the light, and when a moment later he put it down on the sideboard I could see his greasy fingerprints on the crystal.

"I'm going to make a run for it," he said. "I know someone who can get me out."

"For God's sake, Niko," I said. "It's not worth the risk. If you jump bail and they catch you you've had it. Sit tight and you get five years, maybe less. It's hardly the end of the world."

"If I stay here I'm finished," he said. "I'll never work again."

"Don't be so melodramatic. Nobody gives a damn about these things. Get some commercial work, at least for a while. The whole thing might pan out in your favour so long as you're careful. People like notoriety. Some of them are even prepared to pay for it."

"I'm not like you, Ivan," he said. "I'm not going to play their games."

"I resent that."

"You've always gone by the book. That's how you get by."

"I make sure nothing gets in the way of my freedom, if that's what you mean. If I have to

fiddle with a paragraph here and there then that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

"I can't have anyone telling me what I can or can't paint." He picked up his glass and sniffed at the drink inside, inhaling deeply as if smelling a rose. His hands were trembling, though whether from anger or fear I couldn't tell.

"So long as they leave you alone, who cares?" I said.

"And when they don't?" he said. "What then?"

I thought of all the examples I could give him of people who'd had to make the same kind of compromise just to keep working, just to keep the thugs off their back, people like Pasternak and Shostakovich and Boll and Winter. I bit my tongue, though. I was too tired myself. I couldn't face seeing the look on his face if he thought I was comparing myself with Martin Winter.

"Let's talk about this tomorrow," I said. "You look like the walking dead."



LAURA MANAGED TO extricate herself, of course. She stopped seeing Niko on any kind of a regular basis about six months before the whole thing blew up and that worked well in her favour.

She barely appeared at all at the trial and when she did it was via a video link. Her lawyers maintained she had no idea of the use that had been made of her image and to do her credit that's probably true. Laura is blind to anything that bores her. The reason she finished with Niko was that he spent more time with his art than he did with her.

I ran into her on the street not long afterwards. I was just coming out of Green Park tube as she was crossing Piccadilly, most likely hoping to pick up a taxi outside the Ritz. I'm lucky I suppose. If Laura was bored with Niko then God I was bored with her. The fact that I can recall that feeling precisely, a tedium so intense that I sometimes toyed with the idea of murder just so I wouldn't have to hear her voice again, means I can now stop in the street and have a civilized conversation with her. Niko hadn't reached that stage of release. Perhaps he never will.

"Laura," I said. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," she said. "Do you fancy some lunch?" She took off her sunglasses, a pair of Versace shades that would have set me back a month's earnings in the old days. Her eyes are a soft powder blue shading to violet along the margins of the iris. It was always a mystery to me, how the luminous transparency of those eyes could conceal such deep reserves of banality and self-obsession. I don't mean that Laura was stupid. She was sharp as a razor and could grasp a situation in a couple of beats. It was simply the way she had of discounting at a glance everything and anyone that didn't directly concern her.

Being watched turns her on like a spotlight, but it was in those rare moments when she thought herself alone that I was most in love with her. Moments in which she might scrape distractedly at the edge of a fingernail with a piece of worn emery board, or lie on the sofa with her ankles crossed staring up at the ceiling, her mind elsewhere. I used to wonder what passed through her at such moments, whether I would see her differently if I were able to read her mind. Probably not, and in any case her reflective moods never lasted. As soon as she knew I was watching she began to perform, and in so doing she became something else, the thing I had grown tired of and in the end couldn't stand.

We went to a pub at the far end of Curzon Street. Once I'd got the drinks in she asked me straight out about Niko.

"Did you know he was going to jump bail?" she said.

"I was still in Kuwait," I lied. "I had no idea."

"Simon says he's a fool," she said. "We could have found him a decent lawyer if only he'd asked."

You'll know about Simon Caultham, of course. He directed that incomprehensible techno-thriller, *Feet of Clay*, and also *Amber Furness*, based on Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta*. Laura married him at the end of the year she spent living with his first wife, the actress Aurelie Pelling, who played Amber Furness in the film. A lot of people assumed that she and Aurelie had a sexual relationship of some sort, but even if this was so I know for a fact that all the time she was with Aurelie Laura had other lovers. I know because I was one of them. In my opinion the only thing she really wanted from Aurelie Pelling was Simon Caultham.

The miracle there is that they've stayed together. You'd think that with two egomaniacs like that it would be a marriage made in hell but somehow they seem to suit each other. Perhaps it's a

kind of mental arm wrestling: two evenly-matched opponents locked in a perpetual stalemate.

"Niko didn't have that kind of money," I said to Laura. "Not any more. You know that."

"Isn't that what friends are for?" she said. "That's half the trouble with Niko. Always so insistent on his pathetic principles."

"Have you heard from him, Laura?"

She glanced down at her plate and I thought how that is the one thing that will keep her looking young once her looks begin to fade: her touching inability to lie without being detected.

"I've no idea where he is," she said. "I've not laid eyes on him since the trial."

I didn't pursue it. There was nothing to gain, and in any case I was sick of them both. Later on that day I admitted to myself it wasn't just them, I was sick of everything. I was even sick of my apartment in New Cross, with the musty airing cupboard and the leaky bathroom tap. I fingered the travel documents I'd picked up that morning, the stamped visa and boarding pass for the Dubai shuttle, and a wave of relief swept through me. I felt that as long as I could get on that plane I'd be able to sleep, that my current bout of exhaustion would begin to end.

For the first time ever I began to give serious consideration to Sallie Stowell's offer for me to join her bureau in Melbourne. I'd known Sallie for years. We'd stayed in the same hotel in Baghdad during the third Iraq skirmish. She kept pressing me to join her, saying that her junior reporters either left after six months to work in TV or else got themselves kidnapped or killed.

"I could do with a safe pair of hands," she said. I'd always turned her down up till now.

THE BREAKTHROUGH SHOW, the one at the Marlborough, was so successful that Niko could have painted full-time if he'd chosen to, but he kept his post at Central St Martins. It was just one more facet of his naïve idealism. He taught his students with a missionary zeal.

"They have a raw energy about them, you'd see it if you met them," he said. "It's a privilege to be a part of that."

"There's already too much bad art in the world, Niko," I said. "If I were you I wouldn't encourage it." We were in the Pillars, on Greek Street. He had yellow paint under his nails and some kind of plaster dust all down the back of his sweatshirt. He looked like the van Gogh in that made-for-TV biopic, the one starring the German actor who went on to become an expert on UFOs. That was when I found Niko most tedious, when he felt the need to start preaching. If he hadn't been my friend I would probably have despised him as a matter of form.

Laura was right about the legal side of things. There's a Cromwellian fury in these islands that serves as an outlet for bigotry and score-settling and leaves little room for justice. You might almost say it's a calling, that our damp and chilly climate has infected our souls. The Bishops call it a theocracy and claim there's no higher form of government; as far as I'm concerned the revolution was founded on envy, superstition and the good old fashioned lust for power. But Niko's work had its effect, even on me.

I always knew he painted portraits. He never showed them, of course, but he had sketchbooks and portfolios full of them, everything from pencil sketches to finished oils. His students

were all eager to sit for him. One of the first was a stringy dark-haired eighteen-year-old called Joanna Newbis. He painted her naked, elongating her arms and fingers and coarsening the texture of her skin. He showed me some stuff by Egon Schiele and I could see where he was coming from. After the figure studies he painted her face in close-up, and after that he painted her cunt, over and over again. It looked so raw you could almost smell it. In the end you got so used to seeing it you forgot what it was. It became a thing in its own right, a ragged reddish-brown ellipsis, slightly puckered along its edges, like a split fruit or the mouth of a cowrie shell.

I saw him do the same trick with a rose tattoo on a girl's buttock and with the lace edging on a silk camisole. He highlighted colour and texture, emphasising the abstract qualities that lay dormant in the most concrete of subjects. His paintings reminded me of a time in childhood when I lay ill in bed for three weeks with pleurisy. I became delirious for a while, and the most ordinary words stopped making sense to me. The more I repeated a phrase in my head the less meaning it seemed to have. In the end the words broke up entirely, dissolving into a soup of abstract sound, like some ancient alien language all its own. Niko's paintings were like that, enthralling and disturbing at the same time. To dismiss what he did as pornography is simply inane.

If you get the wrong judge, though, sometimes even the right lawyer might not be enough to save you. There's a lot of whispering about corruption but in my opinion the most terrifying judges are those that actually believe in what they're doing. In a way they're just like Niko. There's no reasoning with absolute faith.

I LEFT HIM to make up the bed and then I sent out for food. When it came he ate everything. It was as if he hadn't eaten for days. He looked better after his bath but there was still that unmistakable air of defeat about him, that panicky look people get when they realise there's nowhere to run. He lay back in his seat, his closed eyes flickering beneath the lids. He looked exhausted.

"Where will you go?" I said. I briefly considered what might happen if the morning came and he refused to leave, if he simply postponed his departure from one day till the next until finally they came to collect him. I dismissed the thought at once, not because it seemed far-fetched but because it was something I couldn't bring myself to contemplate.

"I'm going to Leipzig," he said. "Uwe Kaestner has a train ticket waiting for me in Brussels. He says I won't have a problem, so long as I can get on the Eurostar in the first place. But I've got that sorted, too. Stefan Rogers up at the college knows some guy who's meant to be going to Maastricht at the weekend for a conference on pharmaceuticals. He reckons I'll be able to buy his seat."

"But this is madness, Niko. What are you going to do once you get there?"

"Teach, I suppose. As I do here."

"You know that's not going to happen. I've been east of Frankfurt and they just haven't got that kind of infrastructure any more. The universities are a joke – just glorified military academies. Unless you feel like teaching maths or ecology to twelve-year-olds there just aren't any teaching jobs. And in any case, you don't speak a word of German."

At best he'd get some sweeping up job in a canteen or a factory. At worst he'd end up doing manual construction work on one of the sites. That's just about the only thing you can say for Eastern Europe these days: there's always plenty of building work going. He knew this as well as I did. I think that's partly why he looked so tired.

"I'll manage. At least I'll have the freedom to work."

"In one of those high rises with the concrete cancer? Or some basement that fills up with sewage whenever it rains?"

"If I have to."

"Have you been to see Mica?" It was my last ditch effort to persuade him against leaving but it was the wrong thing to say. He shuddered.

"I can't face it," he said. "I'll write to her."

"Does she know you're here?"

"God, no."

Mica Esperanta lived on a decrepit houseboat on the Regent's Canal. Not the park end of course, but the eastern stretch, over towards the King's Cross basin. Her studio was a sub-let, part of some warehouse co-operative in Camden. She taught art part-time at a local primary school but even so I think she found it hard to make ends meet. Once during the summer I saw her stacking shelves at Tesco's. In certain lights she looked haggard and crazy like one of the bag ladies that camp out on the sidings at Waterloo station, but then she'd turn her head and smile at you and seem fragile and appealing as a child. She had a beautiful body but she dressed it so badly you'd hardly notice.

I have the feeling she'd known Niko since childhood but I might be wrong about that. As far as I knew she had always lived alone.

She worked in ceramics, building small sculptures using rolls of clay that she later scraped smooth with a flexible steel kidney. The things she made resembled beach flotsam, or artefacts from some ancient burial site. She had a review in *Scene* once that compared her with Louise Bourgeois. I don't know how she coped with Niko's women. It was something none of us talked about, least of all her.

The strangest thing about Mica was her sympathy with our esteemed Prime Minister, Chamberlain Rouse. I don't mean that she was in favour of the Bermondsey Statutes – she was as enraged by the reinstatement of the death penalty as Niko was – but as far as her own work was concerned she said she found it easy to comply with them. She and Niko were always arguing about it. Mica had done a lot of research on tribes in Papua New Guinea who were terrified of having their photographs taken so she knew all about the sanctity of the human image. Niko accused her of believing in voodoo. When his work was going



well he seemed to thrive on these discussions and we all drank a lot of wine, but when he was having difficulties he could get quite aggressive. Mica seemed to have her ways of calming him but to do her credit she never backed down in an argument.

I'd seen some of the stuff he was working on of course, the Laura paintings, but I didn't know the half of it. If I had done I'd have told him not to be an idiot. It was like he had a death wish or something. But then again that's hardly uncommon among artists.

He worked up the portraits of Rouse from the photographs in the Mackinnon biography. That book was hard to come by, even then, and I can only guess he had a copy imported illegally from Europe. In any case, the likeness was unmistakable: those frilled shirts and velvet blazers he used to wear in his Cambridge days, the heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, the blond hair flopping forward into his eyes. He had developed a house style and he stuck to it: the studied nonchalance of the outcast intellectual. That's something I've noticed about revolutionaries: they always seem to have one eye on the camera, even in the years of obscurity before they start setting the world on fire.

Laura he painted from life. I have to say it was a shock, seeing her like that. I suppose it was seeing those images that made me finally realise she no longer belonged to me, that I truly had lost her for good. Most of them were charcoal drawings and oil sketches, little more than studies really, but there was the full-face portrait of her with the puffed-up eye and the cut lip, and the main canvas of course, with Laura on her knees in front of Rouse. Niko called it *The Magdalene*. He might as well have called it *The Suicide Note*.

HE WENT OUT like a light. I dropped off to sleep OK but woke again in the small hours, full of that sense of foreboding you get when you know that something is wrong but can't immediately remember what it is. Outside it was raining hard. I listened to the water streaming down the faulty guttering and hoped that the window seal in Niko's room wouldn't begin to leak again.

I had traded the Fulham place for the New Cross flat more or less as soon as Laura moved out. Laura loathed South London of course and if I'm honest that's partly the reason I moved there: I knew she would never be tempted to try and come back. She referred to my place in New Cross as the roach motel, although I never had cockroaches, at least not as far as I was aware. The flat was too damp for them, too close to the river. The money I had left over I salted away. I lay in the half-dark with my eyes wide open, wondering if Niko would take any of the money if I offered it to him. It seemed like a waste to me. I imagined him getting off the train in Leipzig and knew he would stand out a mile. He could easily be mugged in the first five minutes if his comrades hadn't sent someone to look after him. I didn't have much in the flat. I wondered how it might look later if the police came looking, if they discovered I'd withdrawn a huge wad of my savings on the very day my old friend Nicholas Shilling had jumped bail and fled to Europe under a fraudulent identity.

Around six o'clock I got up and dressed. I didn't want to wake Niko before I had to, so I washed and shaved at the basin in my bedroom. It was square and heavy, supported by a cast iron bracket held to the wall by rusty great masonry screws. There was a reddish-brown tidemark half way up the porcelain that

never faded no matter how hard you scrubbed. Like everything else in the flat the sink had a pre-war feel, a robust ugliness that had disgusted Laura but for which I felt a grudging respect.

The basin seemed to insist on its rights. Perhaps that was why I had never had it removed, even though for three hundred and sixty-four days of the year I had no use for it.

When I went through to the kitchen to make coffee I found Niko already there. He was fully dressed and seemed more in control of himself than he had done the previous day but the sight of him unnerved me, all the same. If I tell you he looked like his own ghost you'll think you know what that meant: that he looked gaunt and pale and nakedly preoccupied. You'd be right about some of it because he did look all of those things, but there was more to it than that. Looking at him, standing there at the kitchen counter in his tatty old Levis, I became suddenly aware of how irretrievably he had lost his place in the scheme of things. He could not go to the travel agent's down the street and book a seat on an aeroplane, nor could he apply for a teaching post in another part of the country. He could not send mail or email without the risk of it being opened by the Home Office censors. He could not vote. He could not broadcast. He could not publish except under a pseudonym.

I felt a sudden twinge of vertigo, as if these things applied to myself instead of to him.

"I'm going to call Stefan Rogers," I said. "It's safer if I do that. Then I need to go out for an hour or so. Will you be OK here by yourself while I'm gone?"

He nodded. In the time that remained to us we barely spoke two words to each other that weren't essential for basic communication. I downed half a cup of coffee then took the tube up to Whitechapel. I found a public phone box then rang Stefan Rogers and arranged to meet him in a burger bar on the Strand opposite Charing Cross station. I called in at the bank then went to a grubby little shopping mall off Cambridge Heath Road and bought a waterproof rucksack, a pair of Doc Martens and a selection of T-shirts, sweatshirts and jeans. Niko was an inch or so taller than me and I was a couple of pounds heavier than him but we were more or less the same size and I knew the clothes would fit.

It had just gone ten thirty when I walked into Jed's Kebabs. Stefan Rogers was already there, sitting at a corner table reading his *Times*. I ordered myself a coffee and he asked me about the Kuwait job. Just before I got up to leave he handed me a paperback book, a dog-eared copy of Alistair Maclean's *The Guns of Navarone*.

"Thank you for lending me this," he said. "I'd forgotten how good it was."

The train ticket was tucked inside, still wrapped in its cellophane seal and made out in the name of Rogers's acquaintance, one Mark A. Kendrick.

Perhaps we'd gone a little over the top in our precautions but it was a routine we'd both agreed on instinctively, caught halfway between the excitement of some spy game we imagined we were playing and an unspoken mutual terror of exposing ourselves to risk on another's behalf.

At six forty-five that evening I said goodbye to Niko on the concourse of St Pancras. It was still the rush hour. Streams of commuters pushed past us to either side. I looked at him and

shrugged. We embraced. I never saw him again.

I WENT TO the Odeon cinema on Shaftesbury Avenue. They were showing Wendell Lavery's *Passover* and I went in just as the film was about to start. I fell asleep almost as soon as the lights went down and woke up a few minutes before the final credits. I remembered the last time I'd seen the film, with Laura in Istanbul on one of our rare trips abroad together. We'd gone into the cinema because it was the only place the air conditioning seemed to be working. Laura had taken her shoes off under the seat then spent most of the film texting her friends back in London.

When I came out onto the street it was raining again. I walked down Charing Cross road with my head down and bought a *Standard* at the station entrance. There was nothing in the paper about Niko and my heart lifted at that, even though I knew it was far too soon to start feeling relieved. When I got back to the flat I wandered around closing the blinds and putting on lights before finally going into the spare room. Niko had made the bed, pulling the undersheet tight and folding hospital corners as if he'd been to the kind of school that put a value on such things. Perhaps he had. I realised I had no idea.

There was an envelope on the bedside cabinet, one of the cheap white office variety I recognised as my own stationery. It was addressed to Mica Esperanta. The envelope had been stuck down, and when I tried it with the edge of my nail the seal held firm. I took it through to the kitchen and used the kettle to steam it open. The letter inside was written in blue biro on two pages torn from a ring-bound exercise book. His writing was cramped and spidery, a predictable mess. He crossed out liberally, making heavy indentations in the paper.

I put the letter back in the envelope without reading it. It was a simple curiosity I had felt, nothing more, a child's longing to know the end of a story, but I knew it was wrong, all the same. Even if Niko never found out, it was a base impulse and I had no wish to succumb to it. I went to my desk and took out a tube of paper glue I had there. I resealed the envelope and once the glue had dried I went over the flap lightly with a steam iron. When I looked at it the next day it looked like it had never been touched.

IT TOOK ME a month to deliver it. When Mica finally answered her mobile she was on a train somewhere between Stevenage and Euston. We arranged to meet at a pub we both knew not far from Warren Street tube. I arrived there before her. I bought a drink then sat down at a table near the door and waited. She came in carrying a navy zip nylon holdall and wearing a khaki anorak that leached her skin of colour and made her features look heavy and dull. It was as ugly and shapeless as the rest of her clothes and seemed both to hide and to define her. I tried to imagine how she might look in Laura's red Rifat Ozbek trench coat but blanked the mental picture almost at once. It seemed to do both women a disservice.



Her reddish-brown hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail. When she wore it loose it suited her better but she seemed not to realise it. She came and sat beside me, slipping the holdall under the table. As she straightened up again I caught the smell of her sweat, musky and bitter, and realised she must have been running.

"Where have you been?" I said. "I've been trying to call you for ages."

"I had to go away for a bit," she said. "My brother was home on leave."

I remembered she had family somewhere in the Midlands, a sick mother who had once been an opera singer, a brother in the army. I knew nothing about them. Nor did I want to.

"He's gone, hasn't he?" she said. There was a fierce light in her eyes but no tears, at least not yet. I thanked God for small mercies.

"Yes," I said. "He has friends in Leipzig."

"Uwe Kaestner." She tore open the envelope. It opened all of a piece, without ripping. I wondered if she would notice such a small detail and that made me think of Niko, all his crazy talk about spies.

She scanned the letter, moving her lips from time to time as if trying to memorise the words. After a couple of minutes she folded it back in its envelope and tucked it into the inside pocket of her anorak.

"Did you get him to take some money?"

"Of course."

Her question startled me with its unexpected practicality. I looked at the dark bags under her eyes, her tired, somehow hopeless expression, the accumulation of years of worry and vague disappointment, pain she was so used to bearing it had become the norm.

"What will you do?" I said.

"I'll wait," she said. "It's what he says he wants." Her reaction surprised me at first

and I couldn't help wondering again what had been in the letter. I had expected her to flood me with questions, to demand to know the exact details of his escape so she could begin to make plans to follow him. But slowly I began to understand something of his decision to leave without telling her: he needed something to believe in, some last shred of hope. Times changed, after all, and so did regimes. What did the man in exile dream of nightly but a return to his own country, and how much the better if there was a light left burning for him in an upstairs window.

Mica Esperanta would know this. She would make sure the light didn't go out.

She went into the tube at Warren Street and I walked away down Tottenham Court Road, wishing I had a plane to catch. It was a Saturday, and as I drew closer to the centre of town the crowds increased. By the time I got down to Goadge Street I was having to step off the pavement to avoid colliding with passers by. The latest techno-gadgetry sparkled from the windows of the multiple electronics franchises and I thought about a shop I had seen in Budapest once, where knocked-off digital cameras and portable DVD players struggled for space alongside

hunting rifles and World War Two gas masks. The gas masks had been fitted with modern chemical filters, although they still looked like death traps to me. By Percy Street a bank of plasma TV screens in the window of the Sony Centre lingered over the same image: a middle-aged man in prison yellow being forced down a board ramp into what looked like an empty swimming pool. The man's eyes were sunken and haunted, dark with fatigue. The policemen to either side of him each carried what looked like an electronic stun gun such as might be used in an abattoir and in fact that's what they probably were.

The man looked familiar and after a moment or two I recognised him as Noah Pinkowski, the author of *The Rotterdam Club*. I had read the novel in a samizdat carbon copy that had been doing the rounds in Vienna but had stopped short of trying to smuggle it through customs as one of the journos out there had asked me to. They had taken away Pinkowski's glasses – most likely the reason I hadn't recognised him immediately – and he was wearing leg irons.

It was ITN footage, a rerun of his execution. The sound had been muted but there were shots of people in the crowd, their mouths wide open, visibly heckling.

As I turned away I saw two women come out of the store. They looked like mother and daughter, the one a fast-wind-forward of the other. They each held a plastic carrier emblazoned with the crown-shaped logo of one of the new satellite companies.

"Let's go to that place on Charlotte Street," said the older woman. "I'm dying to take the weight off my feet."

The younger woman laughed and shook her head. "I told you those shoes would kill you," she said.

I went straight home and made two phone calls, one after the other. The first was to the branch of Foxton's estate agent's on New Cross Road. The second was to Sallie Stowells in Melbourne.

THERE WAS NO reason to tell Laura I was leaving but I called her anyway. When she said she was coming over to say goodbye properly I didn't try to stop her.

"This place," she said as she entered the flat. "I never thought you'd sell it."

"You hate it, Laura," I said. "You always have."

"I said it's a mess," she said. "That isn't the same thing at all."

Her hair had been recently cut and clung close to her skull like some expensive silk headgear. When I helped her off with her coat her familiar scent drifted out: vanilla and roses, a sweet smell with the vague undertow of corruption.

She went to the window and stared out over the office blocks, renovated tenements and boarded-up garages of New Cross Gate. I went and stood behind her, pulling her against me, letting her feel how hard I was.

"You bastard," she said. I began to unbutton the top she was wearing, a cropped-off cream-coloured cardigan in silk cashmere. We made it slow. At the end I sat on the edge of the bed and let her come sitting astride me in the way she liked, then once she had finished I rolled her on her back and climaxed in a single thrust. When I opened my eyes she was staring right into them, her blue-mauve irises darkened to the colour of lupins. "You bastard," she said again.

We got dressed and I made tea. While going through my stuff

for the house clearance I'd discovered I still had the Meissen *a deux* tea set that one of her girl friends had given us as a wedding present: two cups and saucers, a teapot, milk jug and sugar bowl in that kind of translucent white porcelain that always has an undertint of blue. If Laura remembered it she passed no comment. Her feet were still bare, her legs crossed at the ankles. The skin across the bone was taught, delicate, bluish-white like the porcelain.

"How will you stand it?" she said. "They say Australia is going down the drain."

"I fancy a change," I said. "If I don't like it I can always come back."

IN SUMMER YOU can lie on a hammock strung under the eaves and watch the lightning setting off the bush fires that sometimes burn for most of the season. For some reason and in spite of all the times I've come under fire the lightning terrifies me. One night in an effort to forget about it, I wrote the first six pages of a novel about a girl who had been disfigured in a bomb blast. Two weeks later I was on a plane to Hong Kong to report on the aftermath of the stock exchange shootings. I had a lot on my mind but I found I couldn't forget about the novel. I'd never written fiction before. Once I'd checked into the hotel I hooked up my laptop and had another look at what I'd done.

The words seemed both mine and not mine; the feeling was strange to me and curiously exhilarating. I couldn't help wanting to know how the story might end.

Read Jeffrey Wilson's terrifying new supernatural thriller available now at Amazon.com and studjoebookshelf.com



Raised in the bayou by his trait-
eur grandmother, Ben Morvant
is forced to confront his super-
natural heritage while on a
tragic Navy Seals mission to
Africa. There he meets a witch
doctor who gives him a strange
ring, just moments before he
dies from a terrorist's bullet.
From that moment on, Ben's
powers increase and even after
he leaves Africa, he knows he
must go back to finish what he
started— Because an Evil far
more powerful than the terror-
ists his team hunts awaits...

THE TRAITEUR'S RING
978-1-58755-952-3
Studio E Publications
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"...It's a story that reminds me of old-school King and Koontz, you know, that classic
supernatural thriller style that is character driven....The Traiteur's Ring is a great read."
—Ash Arceneaux, Swampdigger Daily Fiction

"...The author weaves jungle warfare in with a supernatural and mystical element that
creates a whole new experience for readers. There are no other stories like this out
there—this is totally an original idea. It is both creative and explosive." 5 out of 5 Stars
—WH McDonald, American Author's Association

JeffreyWilsonFiction.com

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BOOK ZONE

CONFLICTS

edited by Ian Whates

review by Ian Sales

THE QUANTUM THIEF

Hannu Rajaniemi

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THE BLACK LUNG CAPTAIN

Chris Wooding

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THE JAPANESE DEVIL FISH GIRL & OTHER UNNATURAL ATTRACTIONS

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THE REAPERS ARE THE ANGELS

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SILVERSANDS

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THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT RETURNS

Harry Harrison

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FRITZ LEIBER: SELECTED STORIES

edited by Jonathan Strahan &

Charles N. Brown

review by Paul Kincaid

HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE

Charles Yu

review by Mike Cobley



CONFLICTS

Edited by Ian Whates

NewCon Press, 296pp, £9.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

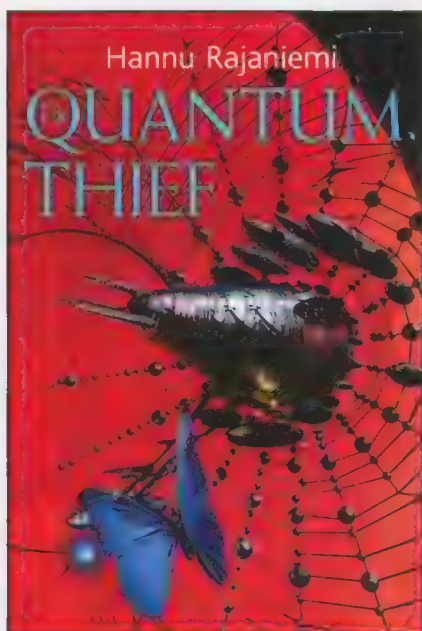
A theme in an anthology is a two-edged sword. It provides a ready-made agenda and structure, and it could draw readers to the book. But it also limits the contents. In the introduction to *Conflicts*, editor Ian Whates describes his desire to publish an anthology that is "brazenly, almost defiantly Science Fiction", one "where you can smell the sweat and the engine oil, as muscle-bound marines heft huge death-dealing guns...where space ships cruise between the stars". And yet I have to wonder what briefing was given to the writers who appear in the book. Merely the anthology's title, perhaps? Or the dictionary definition which opens the book: "Conflict: a state of disharmony between incompatible persons, ideas, or interests; a battle or war". Because there are as many variations on that definition as there are stories in *Conflicts*. So this anthology, happily, and despite Whates' promise, is not the best of British military science fiction...

Although a reader could be forgiven for thinking otherwise, as opener Andy Remic's 'PSI.COPATH' hews closely to Whates' theme. It displays Remic's usual mixture of high body count and low humour, and provides an energetic start to the anthology. It's quickly followed by the space operatics of Michael Cobley, with a story set in the universe of his Humanity's

Fire trilogy. While this teeters on the edge of *smeerp*-overload, it's definitely one of *Conflicts*' better stories. Keith Brooke's 'Sussed' is an abrupt change of pace, with its echoes of Spielberg's *A.I.* and *The Manchurian Candidate*, but sadly never quite convinces. Neal Asher, who is normally good at what he does, provides the distinctly sub-par 'The Cuisinart Effect'. Rosanne Rabinowitz provides one of the more interesting stories in the anthology with 'Harmony in my Head'. It's the first story in here about noncombatants; it is also set in the present day. Chris Beckett's 'Our Land' re-imagines the Palestine-Israel conflict as Brythonic invaders annexing England and putting the English in camps. It's a clever twist, but Beckett's treatment is too heavy-handed and about as subtle as the Israeli military. Gareth L. Powell provides the highlight of the anthology: 'Fallout', a near-future story set in a Bristol depopulated after the crash of an alien craft, and ensuing nuclear fallout, years before. Martin McGrath's 'Proper Little Soldier' is short and struggles against the more substantial stories surrounding it. Una McCormack's 'War Without End' is entertaining and thought-provoking...up until the point where the realisation hits there was nothing in it which required it to be science fiction. Eric Brown turns in a polished piece, 'Dissimulation Procedure', but it feels thinner than his usual fare. David L. Clement's long story, 'In the Long Run', is initially clunky, but around the halfway mark it finds its stride and throws out some good ideas. Jim Mortimore's 'Last Orders' is as anarchic and frenetic as Remic's opener, but its style and voice begin to annoy after several pages. The final story is Martin Sketchley's 'Songbirds', which shows an alien invasion from the point of view of a self-centred teenage girl. Sketchley handles his protagonist's voice well, but the final section is completely unnecessary and should have been cut.

There are few "muscle-bound marines" or spaceships cruising "between the stars" in *Conflicts*, but the contents certainly qualify as science fiction. Whates has not made his theme as limiting as promised in his introduction, and his anthology is the better for it. Unfortunately, the variable quality of the contents means it is not entirely successful. In *Conflicts*, Whates may have met a personal objective, but it's something of a Pyrrhic victory for his readers.

> newconpress.co.uk



THE QUANTUM THIEF

Hannu Rajaniemi

Gollancz, 336pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

Rajaniemi's pacy debut novel is set in a far future where both Jupiter and Phobos have been turned into suns in the aftermath of a war between the godlike Sobornost, who control most of the inner solar system, and the Zoku, now exiled to Mars from their Saturnian home.

On Mars all off-world tech is proscribed. The city called the Oubliette is constantly on the move, built on platforms which change their relative position as it is carried across Hellas Basin on vast articulated legs. Rajaniemi does not fetishise this creation as many another author would. Far from being almost a character in its own right the city is merely an exotic backdrop for his story, not its focus.

In the Oubliette, interactions between people (and buildings) are mediated by technology known as exomemory which captures every thought, dream and action. A filtering system known as gevulot acts as a privacy screen but is opened for speech and donation of information packets called co-memories.

The city's inhabitants all carry Watches which store the Time they use as money. When your Time runs out, death follows. Resurrection Men decant memories and implant them in a new body in which to serve the city as one of the Quiet till enough credit has been accrued to live normally again. On occasion criminals dubbed gogol

pirates deliberately kill in order to steal the deceased's memories and enslave their minds. This is anathema to anyone from the Oubliette (but philosophically it surely differs from being Quiet only in degree). Tzadikkim, a vigilante-type group with enhanced powers, act as an informal police.

The narrative is shared between the first person account of Jean le Flambeur, the quantum thief of the title, and the third person viewpoints of an Oortian, Mieli, who kicks the novel off by springing Jean from an unusual prison round Saturn, and the somewhat too intuitive detective Isodore Beautrelet. Both Jean and Mieli have (rarely used) Sobornost enhancements. In addition, several Interludes fill in backstory and background.

The text can be dense at times. Rajaniemi deploys technological terminology with a flourish; qdots, ghostguns, qupting, Bose-Einstein Condensate ammunition, quantum entanglement rings, qubits, but these can be allowed to wash over any technophobic reader prepared to follow the flow.

By implication Rajaniemi emphasises the importance of memory, not only in the idea of exomemory or the uploading/decanting of personality but also as a component of individual identity. Jean le Flambeur has hidden his past from himself and has no recall of it until others restore it bit by bit via gevulot exchanges.

Rajaniemi's Finnish origins are most revealed by some of the names he uses. Mieli's spidership is called *Perhonen* – butterfly – and he slips in a Finnish expletive in the guise of an Oortian god. There are also borrowings from Japanese, Hebrew and Russian and a subtle Sherlock Holmes reference.

The Quantum Thief is bursting with ideas and there are sufficient action/battle scenes to slake any thirst for vicarious violence, but sometimes it seems as if incidents are present in order to fill in background rather than being necessary to the plot. The motivations of some of the characters are obscure and despite the prominence of gevulot in the Oubliette, conversations and interactions seem to be more or less unaltered in comparison to our familiar world, though had Rajaniemi presented them otherwise they may have been unintelligible.

The denouement brings all the threads together satisfyingly while the final Interlude sheds additional light on the proceedings and sets up possible scenarios for sequels – for which there will likely be an avid audience.

THE BLACK LUNG CAPTAIN

Chris Wooding

Gollancz, 448pp, £18.99 hb/£12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

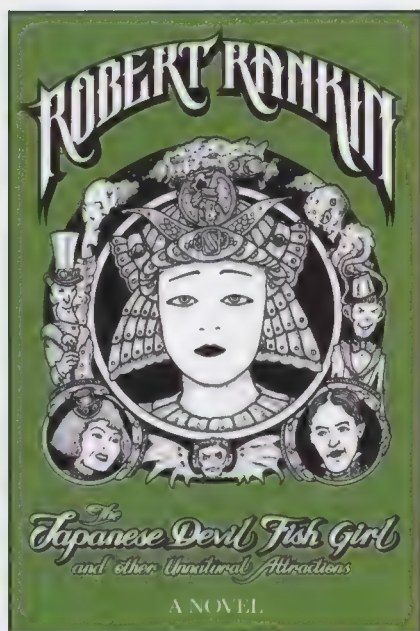
It won't be spoiling it for readers to reveal that the same crew are still with us for the second adventure for the crew of the *Ketty Jay*, as are most of the other survivors for *Retribution Falls*. New characters are introduced, but it feels as if Wooding has already assembled his first-choice team to carry us through the remaining two books.

To bring you up to speed, the *Ketty Jay* is a pirate ship of the air and it plies its trade in the northern climes of a vast fantasy world. The captain is Darien Frey, a charming rogue whose amorous misadventures help to move the plot along, and the rest of the crew comprise of a mix of misfits. Being mostly decent types, they don't do all that much in the way of direct piracy and prefer smuggling and ferrying jobs. Poverty is never far away.

This time Frey is approached by another pirate, the ruthless Captain Grist, who needs the help of his daemonist, Crake, to unlock enchantments on a wreck access gain access to a mysterious treasure. It turns out that the wreck belonged to the Manes, a ferocious Arctic race who are more vicious raiders than any pirate. The MacGuffin is soon stolen by a third pirate captain. Double-crosses abound and this is only the beginning of the story.

This is a knowing adventure that acknowledges the past; the archaic and Delphic chapter summaries are charming and anyone who knows their Robert Louis Stephenson will be on familiar territory. Wooding has a lightness of touch that keeps the fast-moving plot bouncing along in an entertaining fashion. Wit is sharply applied, and there is also a dark weave to some of the cast that adds a depth of texture to the tale, but it is fair to say that no one is going to mistake Wooding for Joseph Conrad anytime soon. The two pilots, in particular, seem to have tape loops in place of personalities, but the book is filled with wonderful set pieces that more than cancel the flaws.

Peter Tennant's Case Notes column in our sister magazine *Black Static* contains lots of book reviews, plus in-depth author interviews and easy to enter draws to win some of the titles covered. Why not add *Black Static* to your subscription? Please turn to the insert for details.



THE JAPANESE DEVIL FISH GIRL AND OTHER UNNATURAL ATTRACTIONS
Robert Rankin

Gollancz, 384pp, £14.99 hb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

Most alternative takes on *The War of the Worlds* are contemporary with it, eg Brian Aldiss' *The Saliva Tree* or Christopher Priest's *The Space Machine*. Comparatively few have looked at the aftermath. The late Chris Boyce's unpublished novel *Martians* took it seriously: his research convinced him that H.G. Wells had set the story c.1910 rather than in the time of writing, and by the end of the 20th century, with Britain still under martial law, people were doubting if it had really happened. The *War of the Worlds* television series, set in the '80s, was based on the timeline of the George Pal film.

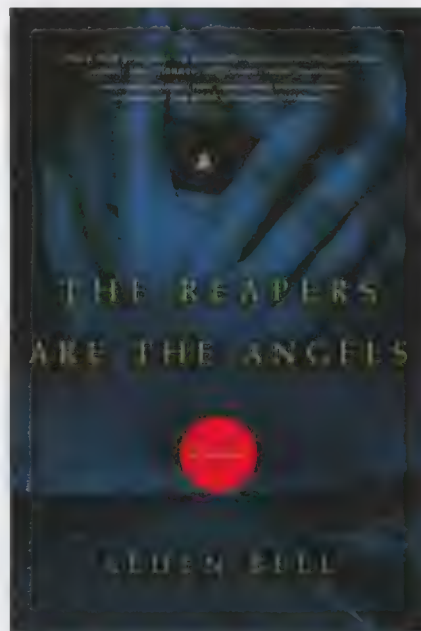
The Japanese Devil Fish Girl is set ten years after the failure of Wells's invasion, which Robert Rankin sets in 1885. Complete victory has been gained: after Britain recovered and mastered Martian technology, a secret biowarfare attack on Mars masterminded by Gladstone, Tesla, Winston Churchill and Charles Babbage has wiped out the enemy on their homeworld, and the British Empire now aspires to interplanetary greatness. Meanwhile, it's been revealed that infiltrators from Venus and Jupiter have been living among us for many years. Any pretence to serious content disappears round about then – so footnotes pointing out differences from history as we know it

are an irritation rather than a running joke.

The *Candide*-like innocent hero, George Fox, is a carnival attendant in charge of a pickled Martian. Determined to rise to greatness, he is manipulated by his amoral boss Professor Cagliostro Coffin and the little more scrupulous Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's immortal daughter. Ada bears an uncanny resemblance to the statue of Sayito, the Japanese Devil Fish Girl of the title, which is located on an unknown cannibal island near Hawaii, guarded by flying monkeys. George, the Professor and Ada reach it on the doomed maiden voyage of the airship *Empress of Mars*, whose crew includes Captain Bigglesworth and a bootboy named Adolf Hitler, by way of a disastrous encounter with P.T. Barnum in New York and a firefight with Christian fundamentalists which leaves much of the city in flames. At this stage a talking monkey named Darwin joins the party. On the unnamed island, the survivors of the *Empress of Mars* find that the temple is built over the entrance to Lemuria, an underground now occupied by the last horde of the Martians.

Having dismissed stories of a similar island inhabited by a giant ape as a tall tale, the Professor and others are determined to bring the statue to London as the ultimate fairground attraction. However it features as a holy relic in the religions of both the Venusians and the Jupiterians, both of whom launch invasion fleets against Britain to avenge the insult to their goddess, while the Martians break free from Lemuria with equal determination to seize back the statue. Darwin (the monkey, not the biologist) is promoted to General and put in charge of the defence of London.

Yes, I have given away most of the plot, and in this case it hardly matters. Like *Candide*, the structure of this book is a long series of comic encounters, laden with historical references, anachronisms, puns and in-jokes – many of them SF and fantasy-related, but not too many to spoil the enjoyment of new readers. This is perhaps the moment to ask ourselves whether steampunk has anything new to offer, or whether the joke has run its course. I have to say that although I'm a relative newcomer to that genre, it's already starting to wear thin for me. I enjoyed Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* series in its time, but if the scope is limited to, say, 1850–1950, there are only so many historical figures to play with before it becomes repetitive. But I would recommend *The Japanese Devil Fish Girl* to fans of the genre, or to new readers.



THE REAPERS ARE THE ANGELS

Alden Bell

Tor, 304pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

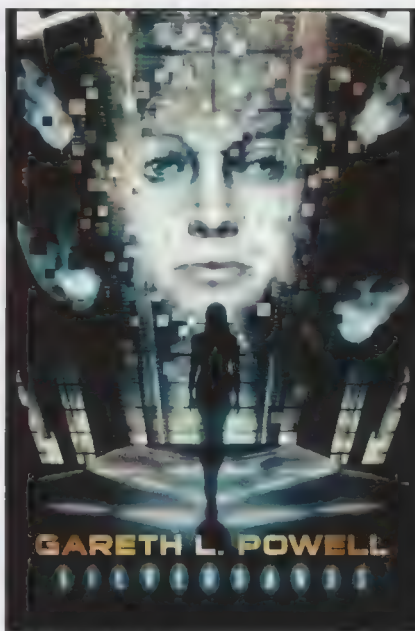
Faced with a post-disaster novel, the reader inevitably asks, "How did this happen?" However the novel responds to this question, if only to shrug and say "it just did", because the characters themselves don't know why, the reader must nonetheless feel that the writer knows, even if he has chosen not to share. I am not convinced that Alden Bell does know why, one day, some twenty-five years before the novel's opening, the dead began refusing to lie down, and now roam the countryside, attacking the living. Perhaps he needs no other reason than that zombies are currently in literary vogue, but Bell seems a more intelligent writer than that. *The Reapers Are the Angels* opens with an epigraph from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, and he references American writers such as Steinbeck, Welty and Flannery O'Connor. Nor should we overlook Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. This novel is filled with people lighting out for the territory, and all of a sudden there is so much territory.

My impression is that Bell is not writing a science-fiction novel so much as using science-fictional ideas as background. Zombie America doesn't properly hang together in the ways an sf reader might expect. This is a world that drifts in and out of focus, its social fragmentation as much metaphorical as it is literal. There are

always working cars and petrol when they are needed; random towns inexplicably still have electricity; there is still prepackaged food to be found in supermarkets. There are far fewer people but although there are dark hints of things having been much worse, there is now comparatively little anxiety. People move away from zombies as they might move away from noisy neighbours.

At the novel's heart is Temple, an extraordinarily self-possessed adolescent, travelling through the devastated southern states on a picaresque journey that traces an arc from Florida to Texas. She is nominally running from Moses Todd, who seeks revenge for her killing his brother, while also taking Maury, a huge childlike man, to his surviving family. This is not so much a plot as a reason for Temple to keep moving, providing the opportunity for the reader to tour this strange new world. Much about Temple remains unexplained. She learned some of her survival skills from a man who rescued her from life in the wild when she was about ten, but claims to know little about who she is or where she comes from. She uses a different name with strangers but, given her biblical cadences, one must assume that 'Temple' carries some significance. Moses Todd at one point describes them both as "children of God" and says that "to us the world is a marvelment", though Temple takes most encounters with scarcely a raised eyebrow. She is the only woman in the entire novel who has mobility and agency and, apart from Moses' brother, everyone treats her with a surprising amount of respect. By contrast, other characters are literary types rather than individuals, wandering in from other parts of the southern gothic landscape.

This novel is so frustrating to read. So much about it just doesn't quite add up, and I am not sure that is intentional. It has its Emersonian moments of transcendental beauty balanced by Faulkneresque grotesques but sometimes the reader really needs the author to contrive a word or two of explanation. It has a plot element that I suspect the author might suggest is a coup de theatre whereas to me it seems like an elementary compositional flaw (to say more would be to destroy the novel's denouement). And much as I like what the author is trying to do I feel he too often relies on the kindness of readers to get him through the difficult narrative passages between the keenly observed set-piece encounters.



SILVERSANDS

Gareth L. Powell

Pendragon Press, 168pp, £12 hb

Reviewed by Paul Cockburn

Gareth L. Powell has spent the last few years building a reputation as the writer of memorable and touching short stories, not least 'Ack Ack Macaque', published in *Interzone* #212. *Silversands* is his first novel – albeit, at roughly 50,000 words, a relatively short one. And yet the length would seem to be a problem; Powell's tale of hi-tech intrigue and futuristic action, while certainly entertaining, remains a somewhat unsatisfying read because of its brevity.

His story is set a hundred or so years in the future, by which time humanity has begun to travel the stars through a network of ancient, alien-built wormhole devices – so far, so *Stargate*, you might think. Powell's twist on the idea is that humanity has yet to discover how to navigate through the wormholes, leaving a random scattering of colonies amongst the stars, some of which have fared better than others when it comes to survival.

Avril Bradley is a communications officer aboard the starship *Pathfinder*, which has officially been sent out from Earth on a mission to locate and re-establish links, where possible, with these lost pioneers. However, she is also on a personal quest to find Cale Christie, the man she believes is her father. So when the *Pathfinder's* latest 'jump' brings it to *Silversands*, she believes she is close to finding her man – Cole was on board the massive colony

ship *Anastasia*, carved from the heart of an asteroid by the industrialist David Lear, which is still in orbit around the planet.

Powell confounds readers' expectations by bringing Avril and Cale together almost immediately, signalling that the relationship between the two is not the heart of the story after all. Not that the pair have much time to sort out their own issues; almost immediately, they are ensnared in the interlinked and competing machinations of an agoraphobic corporate spy, corrupt politicians and a self-anthropomorphizing artificial intelligence – with Cale being given a very personal deadline by which to get things sorted out. And the cause of all the fuss? Some access-locked computer files in the depths of the *Anastasia's* computer substrate – for which Avril is, unwittingly, a vital key – which people want to either possess or ensure are never opened.

It's fair to say that the novel unfolds at breakneck speed, to the extent that it's often a story we're told rather than shown, especially when it comes to the authorial 'filling in' of characters' backgrounds and histories. To that extent, *Silversands* does unfortunately come across as a novel told at the pace of a short story; potentially more time could have been spent letting the narrative 'breathe' more freely.

That said, it's to Powell's credit that, rapidly though this particular plot thickens, we nevertheless learn to care about his main characters and [Spoilers!] the deaths of some come as genuine, dramatic knocks. This is because, while neither a particularly flashy nor overtly stylish writer, Powell is a master when it comes to using small details to give us a sense of the whole person – even the otherwise unnamed, never-seen-again PA described simply as "a young man with qualifications in both administration and hand-to-hand combat".

So, in many respects *Silversands* is an excellent debut, but there are reservations nonetheless. Frankly, this is a novel that could afford to take more time. For example, when we finally get to the potentially awe-inspiring *Anastasia* vessel, there's simply no time to take in the full splendour of its interior ecosystem because it's just another background in an extended, life-or-death chase sequence. That, along with a rather open-ended 'conclusion', left at least this reader entertained but unsatisfied by a story that, with a little more care, could have really shone.

> pendragonpress.net



THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT RETURNS

Harry Harrison

Tor, 304pp, \$24.99 hb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

His name might be James Bolivar DiGriz, but he is known to us better as 'Slippery Jim' or 'The Stainless Steel Rat'. Bank robber, con artist, master of disguise and the martial arts, elite law enforcer, spy, time-traveller, planet saver, and occasional galaxy saver. It's been a busy life, and he's enjoying his retirement with his wife, Angelina, on Moolaplenty with a bank account full of millions of credits, and a drinks cabinet full of, er, drinks. But here comes a very unwelcome guest in the shape of far, far removed cousin Elmo from Jim's home planet of Bit O'Heaven, with his porcuswine (a cross between a pig and a porcupine). In fact, he's brought a whole rickety spaceship full of farmers and their animals along with him by hiring (well, they would have hired it if they had the credits in the first place, and guess who is going to have to foot the bill?) an interstellar rust-bucket called the *Rose of Rifuti* owned by the crooked Cap'n Rifuti.

Forced to help Elmo and the others, the Rat soon finds himself dealing with port guards, health and safety inspectors and higher powers which insist that the animals can't stay on Moolaplenty, so he has no choice but to use persuasive powers and rapidly diminishing credits to take over the ship, but the rag-tag crew jump ship at the first opportunity and Jim finds himself broke and heading into space with virtually



no crew, the herdsmen, their wives and the porcuswine, and beautiful, but slightly homicidal Angelina by his side. If you have followed the Rat's adventures before you'll know that this is a woman who previously went through "psycho therapy" to take the edge off her more sociopathic tendencies. "Not in the heart!" the rat shouts hopefully at one point before she opens fire. Unfortunately, Rifuti has not given up his ship without planting a booby trap or ten.

Thus we are lost in space without enough water to power the reaction mass tank or enough Gravitons for the Bloater Drive (think stretching an elastic band with one hand as far as you can and moving your other hand towards the hand that did the stretching – hey, if the Rat doesn't understand it, do you think I do?). First unintentional stop is a planet ruled by cruel, invading off-worlders who have used their religion to subdue the friendly non-meat eating locals. The rat senses an opportunity to help the indigenous people while accessing the communication channels of the invaders to summon help for their stricken ship, and possibly off load Elmo and the others at the same time. Despite his elaborate plans, our intrepid band find themselves heading off into space again, having to make an unexpected right-hand turn to avoid an exploding star and encounter a most unusual alien race.

Harrison's style is deceptively light, but addictive, sucking the reader into a fast-moving humorous plot. For some reason I was reminded of a bright, glossy American sitcom, like the coloured series of *Bewitched*. "Honey, I'm home, where's my drink, and put down that gun, okay?" Hardly anything misses his satirical eye here and, given the current economic climate, he has a lot of fun by setting the story in the aftermath of the galactic credit crunch where financial prudence is all, and so is having enough credits to pay for your talking taxi. My favourite are the bankers with a ball and chain attached which can be pumped full of Improvium if they misbehave. This is a fast-paced hoot from start to finish. Jim, welcome back, you have been missed.



FRITZ LEIBER: SELECTED STORIES

Edited by Jonathan Strahan & Charles N. Brown

Night Shade Books, 400pp, \$24.95 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Nothing ages quite like science fiction. In a genre that is so wedded to the new, old visions of the future become tired very quickly. Writers once considered central to the whole enterprise are marginalised and forgotten within a few years of their death; most, justifiably so. Some writers survive because they still seem fresh (the young H.G. Wells) or because they are so open to parody (H.P. Lovecraft), or because they still have a whiff of importance about them (Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein – though I have my doubts about how long some of those will survive). The rest drift into an oblivion penetrated only by the occasional historian or die-hard fan. A few, a very few, deserve better than that.

Fritz Leiber is one of that few. Since his death, nearly twenty years ago, his works have fallen out of print, and yet many of them cling tenaciously to the memory. This collection of 17 stories (a small fragment of what he wrote) is an attempt to remind us why he should be remembered and valued as a writer whose fiction still has incredible power and importance today.

His prose was cool, precise, concrete, not prey to literary fashions and eminently readable still. His subject matter was varied, ranging from creepy horror ('Smoke Ghost' about a man haunted by a sooty creature) to startling science fiction

(‘A Pail of Air’ about a family scraping an existence when the very air has frozen). He was one of those who invented heroic fantasy, primarily through his tales of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser (three of which are collected here, best of which is the story of their meeting, ‘I’ll Met in Lankmar’, and I’m not sure the other two were really necessary here). He played with steampunk long before it even acquired a name (‘Catch That Zeppelin!’ about a man suddenly transported into an alternate America where he finds that he, Adolf Hitler, is an executive on the Germany to America zeppelin line). Each of these stories, and others, play effectively and intelligently with genre conventions: he knew how to twist and turn a standard line so the story becomes fresh. His horror stories in particular (‘Smoke Ghost’, ‘The Girl with the Hungry Eyes’, ‘A Deskful of Girls’), despite a sometimes dubious attitude towards women, manage to be startlingly original and powerful.

But he was at his best in stories that leave you guessing whether anything fantastic or supernatural or science fictional actually happened. You can read ‘Space-Time for Springers’, perhaps the best sf story about cats ever written, as if Gummitch did achieve his translation into human form, or as if he didn’t, and it doesn’t affect the potency of the story one whit. ‘The Inner Circles’ can be read as a haunting or as a psychological portrait of a failing marriage, and both are equally valid. ‘Belsen Express’ might indeed concern collective guilt for the holocaust, or it could simply be the story of a man on his way to a fatal heart attack. And my particular favourite, ‘Four Ghosts in Hamlet’, might well be the story of Shakespeare returning, at an apposite moment, to play the ghost in *Hamlet* for a small touring company. But there are other explanations; what you take away from it is a wonderfully sharp yet tender portrait of the stresses and relationships in a not overly successful theatrical company, written by someone who was himself an actor and clearly knew what he wrote about.

The joy is that not one of these stories feels dated, the prose is a delight to encounter, and there are effects here that no other science fiction writer could match. Fritz Leiber wasn’t just important, he was good. And if this collection can bring his work to the attention of a new generation, then it deserves every accolade going.

> nightshadebooks.com



HOW TO LIVE SAFELY IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE

Charles Yu

Pantheon, 256pp, \$24.00 hb

Reviewed by Mike Coble

Ah, yes, book reviewing is a bit like being dealt cards – you just never know what you’re gonna get off the top of the deck. Charles Yu’s debut novel has been dealt out to the coteries of online and hardcopy reviewers (and thus to the readership at large) like a two of clubs when you’re begging for anything in diamonds.

Yu’s origins are instructive – he is a lawyer working for a visual effects company in California, and in 2006 published a short story collection entitled *Third Class Superhero*. Most of the stories therein did not appear in yer regular SF/fantasy magazine; oh no, they were published by such pillars of the SF community as *Oxford American*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Harvard Review*, or the *Mississippi Review*. Hmm. Then, in 2007, he was selected as a promising writer by the National Book Foundation (that well known promoter of SF writing), namely one of its ‘5 Under 35’.

Okay, you get the picture. Charles Yu writes literature, and is therefore exciting and promising.

On the evidence of this novel you can see why. The story is fractured and meandering, the plot such as it is lacks any real dramatic tension, and the furniture of skiffy time travel eschews any attempt at logic (or clear elucidation). He can,

however, write with a certain low-key lyricism allied to character depth, not too showy, certainly no carpet-chewing scenes, and depicted with colourless, minimalist description. Wow, if you’re an arbiter of high literature, a practised and eagle-eyed gatekeeper at the portals of civilisation, this – THIS, is quite desirable, the acceptable face of speculative fiction (not sci-fi, mdears, heaven forfend).

So, the novel is told in first-person, with a vaguely future setting, and the viewpoint character is called Charles Yu. He is a time machine repairman, tooling around Universe 31 (which is itself faulty) while engaged in a desultory search for his father. So from the outset the book has a self-referential frame, later reinforced when he shoots his future self and acquires a book called *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*.

I cannot tell a lie: when I got to that bit my thoughts went something like *dear god, shoot me now too...*

Yes, as you can guess, Yu is heavily into the self-recursive narrative. Thus the Charles Yu character investigates the book, take an extended trip to a period in the past when he worked with his father on the time machine prototype, then winds up back at the point where he shot his future self only now he is the future self who gets shot... From which point there are a few more pages of reflection upon the paradoxes and the irony of killing himself only to be killed by himself, after which a petered-out end is reached. Well, at least he didn’t turn into his own father.

Beyond the somewhat offhand approach to time-travel plotting (it can be a little twisty but is a five finger exercise next to the likes of Heinlein’s ‘By His Bootstraps’), the story is prone to tiresome word-play, the observational kind which certain arbiters of taste regard as the hallmark of fine writing but which provoked in me a jaw-breaking yawn.

Ultimately, this is an SF novel for people who view SF with distaste. It doesn’t come anywhere near the superlative heights scaled by Sheckley or Adams, yet it has already garnered plaudits and hymns of praise by the tanker-load. I am quite sure that there are readers who would find this a charming and instructive book, as well as critics who would look upon my snarky words as an unpardonable act of brute dismissal. But I’m sitting here with a two of clubs when I need a diamond face card, so chucking in such a pointless hand is the only option.



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

STARGATE UNIVERSE

• AFTER LIFE

• HUNTER PREY

• KICK-ASS

• FRINGE

• DELICATESSEN

• MULHOLLAND DRIVE

• DEATH NOTE 1 & 2

• MEGA PIRANHA

• CENTURION

• BASEMENT

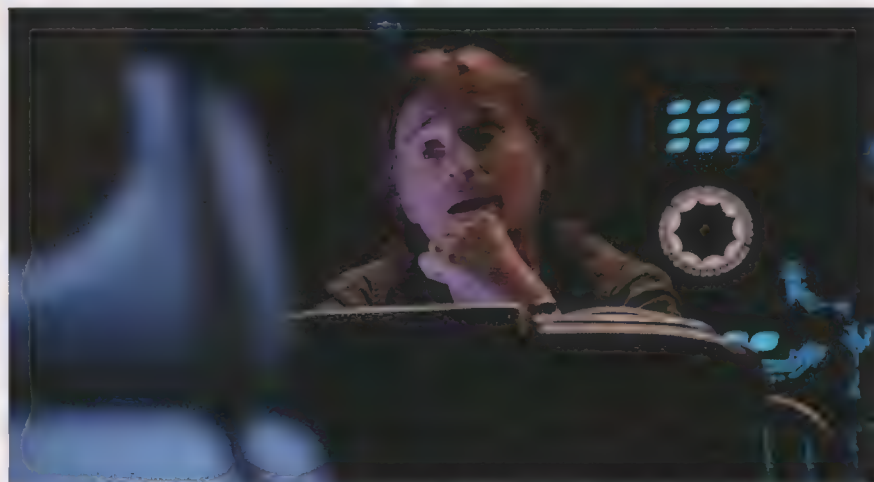
• THE LAST SEVEN

• BEYOND THE RAVE

• CHERRY TREE LANE

• DEATH TUBE

• MEGA SHARK OF THE MALIBU



If you fail at comedy, at least nobody laughs at you. The same cannot be said of SF on TV. **Stargate Universe Season One** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 July) is manifestly superior to all previous *Stargate* shows but still entirely derivative as combo treatment of *Blake's 7* and *Star Trek Voyager*, with visual stylings copied from *BSG* remake. Setting aside basic flaws and predictability of its development, *SGU* is about as worthwhile a space opera spin-off made for this particular franchise could ever hope to be. "As you know" speeches reload essential backstory with chevron encoded specifics locked. Following evacuation of Icarus base colony on a distant planet, subsequently destroyed by enemy raiders, survivors are gated to gigantic starship *Destiny*, many galaxies distant from local group of home system. 'You are here': good luck.

Although the programme makers intended most new characters to be 'ordinary' people, there are still 'experts', seemingly formed in vacuum pressure machinery of demographic-appeal focus group research, ensuring skiffy TV stereotype purity while avoiding any

risky contamination of individuality/freshness and, for a supposedly top secret organisation, they all have mission badges anyway. Hacker/'maths boy' Eli (David Blue), recruited for his geeky dream job. He teams up with edgy rationalist Dr Rush (Robert Carlyle), plus assorted puddle-jumpers all subsequently trapped while on their expedition into the unknown. Overstressed Colonel Young (Justin Louis) betrays nominal civilian authority Camile (Ming-Na). Army medic 'T.J.' (Alaina Huffman, 'Black Canary' in *Smallville*) is relied upon for doctoring injuries/illness, but her pregnancy creates problems. Orphaned/grieving senator's daughter Chloe (Elyse Levesque) is love interest for more than one bachelor.

Now tragically lost in space on runaway alien starship with no apparent way home – via wormhole network established by ancient astronauts' von Neumann probe seeding – humans find galactic cruiser *Destiny* is faulty, making a quest for resources priority ("Is there anything else?"). Like so much sci-fi TV, most serious failure is that alien stuff lacks an



appropriate sense of otherness. Swiss film *Cargo* (and even deeply flawed *Pandorum*) generates creepy atmosphere on a *man-made* transport, yet *SGU's* *Destiny* is readily 'hospitable' for humans. For all its crass peculiarities, at least *Lexx* had richly dissonant weirdness about its ET spacecraft that keen SF fans appreciated.

Ensemble cast of *SGU* are aided by guest spots, with various stars of *SG TV* franchise, particularly abundant in the first episode and season's finale. Soldiers and officers are forced to 'unlearn' military training and realise that bullying of civilians and scientists won't solve crises or survival problems. Eli discovers flying camera gadgets, used for succinct confessionals or rambling video-logs, although personal 'kino' commentaries are reminiscent of Pinback's rants in *Dark Star* (1974). Happily, for some, body-swap tech enables/maintains brief contacts with Earth (or Pentagon anyhow), but doesn't prevent/alleviate paranoia encroaching upon *Destiny's* inmates, and most exchanges avoid philosophical reflections on privacy/identity/phildickian confusions in favour of soap opera about 'familiar strangers'. Colonel Telford (Lou Diamond Phillips) finds condemnation in his affair with Young's wife. SF notions are rarely innovative for TV. *Destiny's* aero-braking in gas giant's atmosphere (as per demo in Hyams' 2010) only prompts a sun-dive course. Microscopic alien swarm behaves like invasive nanotech. Foraging on jungle planet, team find a *Blair Witch* kino record of divergent timeline. A risky mission needs venom from bites to counteract another lethal infection. "Well, this couldn't get much worse." "I'm afraid that's a failure of imagination."

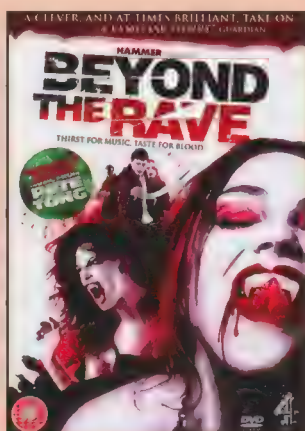
Just as in previous *SG* shows, *Universe* is largely driven by plot/character without

closer focus on genre ideas or their potential for examining more intriguing dilemmas. A 'lifeboat' episode, where lottery winners become shuttle load of hopeful survivors to unknown planet, is typical/standard fare. Deep space encounter with CGI-blue/sinister aliens sees Chloe abducted, but soon rescued by Dr Rush from psychic trauma/amnesia on the pirates' vessel. Predictable revenge-of-nerds coup against Young's harsh regime is nixed before lives are lost. Dreariness of 'refugee camp' existence aboard *Destiny* goes on while fragile détente between guns and sense is maintained by some coldly tense negotiations. *Destiny* stops FTL journey upon finding a mysteriously uncharted new star, with its own somewhat Edenic world (a 'promised land' where, as expected, the believers in fate and miracles choose to stay), apparently created by advanced aliens who may also have built the obelisk beacon which beams a signal into the perfect sky. (A more pointlessly imitative tribute or mediocre homage to 2001 I have yet to find.) Dr Rush's frustration – as egotistical scientist, failing to crack *Destiny's* helm control codes – is here explored via lucid dreaming 'flashbacks' (with *SG* regular Dr Jackson) to find numerology key. Guest star Rhona Mitra (*Doomsday*, *Skinwalkers*) plays the new queen bitch of *SGU*. Kiva interrogates/tortures Dr Rush, before she leads troops to occupy *Destiny* during season closer, *Inursion*, which sees lethal radiation from a binary pulsar inflict confusion during armed stand-off.

Good but not great sci-fi telly, with many significant improvements over previous *SG* series (how much of this is due to the involvement of SF author John Scalzi as creative consultant is anyone's guess), but *SGU* remains pedestrian as science fiction.



Teacher Anna (Christina Ricci) goes to a funeral, and is then killed in a car accident. Stern undertaker Deacon (Liam Neeson) sees and confronts various unquiet souls, including Anna's, coaxing the newly deceased towards a dignified acceptance of their painless 'transition', while dealing with assorted distraught or mourning relatives, but is poor Anna actually dead, or is there, as Deacon asserts, simply "no life left in her"? **AfterLife** (DVD/Blu-ray, 6 September) is a textbook exemplar of how tragic reality can impinge upon the world of cinema, bringing uncanny poignancy to screen drama. Here, it's because Neeson's actress wife Natasha Richardson died shortly after he had finished working on this psychological chiller, which astutely taps into Poe-style fears of premature burial. Justin Long (*Die Hard 4*) portrays Anna's frantically despairing boyfriend Paul, raging insanely against his loss, sharing Anna's gloomy fury, in some stunningly presented nightmarish shocks. Despite an uneasy vagueness for Deacon's motivations as a brooding mortician, first-time writer-director Agnieszka Wojtowicz-Vosloo generates plenty of weird atmosphere, winningly punctuated by entertainingly gruesome visions benefiting from bold use of strong colours throughout, and sombre yet moody lighting in corpse-handling scenes that rarely flinch away from ugly truths of undertaking as morbid profession. There are obvious clues but, thankfully, the film maintains, for genre-literate viewers, its



quirky Schrödinger ambiguity with regard to Anna's precarious state until the closing act. Radiohead's classic *OK Computer* track, 'Exit Music (For A Film)', originally written for Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, plays over closing credits, cementing *AfterLife*'s welcome, although still rather pretentious, quasi-Shakespearean allusions to doomed romance. Even though she's playing a dead girl, Ricci's frequent nudity is very likely to attract male viewers. However, the overall effect here is one of measured creepiness with quietly disturbing moods, not amusing titillation.



Maquette characterisations and the overly familiar backstory of genocidal conflict are crucial defects of **Hunter Prey** (DVD, 6 September), essentially just a planet-bound derivative of space opera *Enemy Mine* (1985) – which itself owed substantial debts to Boorman's WWII drama *Hell in the Pacific* (1968). Stranded on a desert world, lone human is pursued by aliens. Special effects creator, now debut feature writer-director Sandy Collora is at pains, initially, to keep viewers confused about identifying species of tactically-helmeted soldiers, or a black-robed escaped prisoner, yet this predictable 'twist' is quite unsophisticated in terms of cognitive estrangement in SF perspectives, adding no originality to subtext or narrative. Despite appearances, lumpy and chalky marshmallow-faced 'aliens' exhibit many notably human characteristics anyway. Cat 'n' mouse antics ensue across the barren landscape,

so predation eclipses exploration (in trad sci-fi manner of *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*), and this compares unfavourably to Nimród Antal's *Predators* franchise reboot, emerging from its basic plot, modelled on 'wild west' heritage, without any bright ideas or contemporary thematic relevance. Worse still, there's no appreciable sense of sci-fi fun here, as can be found in the likes of other planet-fall adventures *Spacehunter* (1983) or *Pitch Black* (2000). Although it's quite possible to make a serious SF movie without an adequate budget, the world-building effect inherent in space opera demands prodigious imagination and upscale production values that small/indie movies rarely possess. This is not a bad film, but it's certainly not a good one either: somewhat overambitious in its scale, but never in its genre ideas. Collora has made a couple of nifty amateur shorts based on superhero comics, so I wonder what he could produce if adapting the conceptual material from a major SF novel.



Not so much another genuine comicbook opus (in the mode of *Hulk* or *Dark Knight*) as it is a cynical, yet ultimately feel-good, lampoon of comicbook culture and fandom, **Kick-Ass** (DVD/Blu-ray, 6 September) benefits from supporting character presence of Nicolas Cage, but its main players offer merely basic performances at best, in roles hardly better than we have seen before in spoofs like *Mystery Men* and *The Specialists*. For

most of its runtime, *Kick-Ass* taps into *Spider-Man* lore frivolity ("with no power, comes no responsibility") and Japanese animation, where stylised ultra-violence by pre-teen heroines is commonplace. This is slick but vacuous, an uninspired evocation of Besson's oeuvre (particularly *Nikita* and *Léon*), focused on supposedly cool images. In British genre cinema, the 'homicidal schoolgirl' icon harks back to Freddie Francis' campy *Mumsy, Nanny, Sonny & Girly* (1970), while 'psycho girly' was also parodied more recently in *St Trinian's* franchise reboots. Though *Kick-Ass* might be forgivably viewed as a British production, it's only British insofar as it offers a jaundiced POV of USA (its intended market, clearly), in a similarly distorted manner to *Austin Powers* movies serving up ruinously simplistic American views of a cretinously covert Britain. Curiously, this is an oil-and-water mix of adolescent fantasy, within off-kilter screen reality, that's closer to *Saturday Night Live* TV whimsy than dark twisted daydreams of anonymous vigilantism. In despair, the confused 'kick-ass' wannabe fails to realise, until it's much too late, that being a 'superhero' is not about a flashy costume, or even about having special powers, it's simply about knowing what to do, whenever... It has often been touted 'there is no tough, only trained or untrained', but director Matthew Vaughn (who did a better job on *Stardust*) loses this 'plot' early, because *Kick-Ass* is so busy spoofing arrays of subgenre favourites (from origin traumas of *Darkman* and *Wolverine*, to media satires of *Condorman* and *RoboCop*) its clever-dick smart-aleck disingenuous borrowings neglect any funny business beyond the obvious lurid effects of splatter-punk fighting. While *Watchmen* attempted an assertive deconstruction of super heroic

myths, *Kick-Ass* wanders drunkenly off the playing field in the opposite direction; sometimes a blockhead antihero farce, frequently a garish CGI stunt mash-up of unpleasant jokes with a spew of second-hand punch lines. Let's not confuse its mask of notoriety with genre frontline audacity. All bananas together now: "Tra la-la, la-la la-la/tra la-la, la-la la-la..."



Very much a new *X-Files* copycat, **Fringe Season Two** (DVD/Blu-ray, 27 September) sees FBI agent Olivia Dunham back from the beyond, seemingly augmented in subtle, possibly psychic, ways, though disturbed by amnesia of whatever important 'message' she was given while in that parallel world, visited briefly during finale of season one. 'Here you are': bad luck... Now targeted by a shape-shifting soldier, Olivia learns the hard way that "travelling to an alternate reality has its consequences". However, just as story-arc instalments of *X-Files* made way for mysteries unconnected to secretive government, the on-going mythos of defensive 'fringe science' group switches back to mainly investigative tracks for various standalone episodes, where we may admire the clarity of mission objectives despite often silly pseudoscience/general vagaries of this programme's brief. ("Can I see the body that's bleeding silver?") Exploding people are ultimate human bombs, hacked cyber-implants of sleepwalkers enables kill-switch of homicidal mania, NYC building wrecked by its 'twin' during a bizarre quantum quake event (a clever twist on *The Philadelphia Experiment*); the 'Pattern' is in effect but its purpose remains unclear. Frankensteinian assemblage, with one stolen cryogenically frozen head, resurrects new *Fringe* nemesis Thomas Jerome Newton (the name used by alien of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), and other genre refs abound, from Dunwich mental hospital, *Wizard of Oz*, *Sliders*, Jet Li's *The One*, to Clarke's third law. Within its symbolic images of six-fingered hand and tiny apple-core foetuses, there's a key to *Fringe*'s basic appeal, regarding its attempts to dramatise or embody questions about ethics in scientific endeavours, usually as

moral dilemmas, albeit shaping concerns in a rudimentary fashion ("Conspiracy nuts are gonna have a field day"). Whenever they are not simply weird-crime solvers, psi testers, or chase freaks, 'Team Fringe' strive to address thorny issues of whether there really are grey lines that should not be crossed in wholly new branches of research, particularly biomedical fields. Peter Weller (from *RoboCop*, *Odyssey 5*) guest stars as a 'cyborg' time-traveller who kills everyone in his vicinity with every successive 'jump' backwards. Can he be trusted to 'fix' things when this *Groundhog Day* style fantastic journey reaches his final destination?

One of this season's most entertainingly 'fun' episodes concerns alt. world views of a paramilitary Fringe division, in a reality with airships on Manhattan skyline, and has blonde Olivia confront her redhead doppelganger. Revelations about the origin of Peter Bishop are, in fact, rather predictable, but with Peter still caring for his "perfectly sane" maverick scientist/dad Walter (frequently edgy and nonconformist, yet always sympathetic: a hugely impressive performance by John Noble), J.J. Abrams' *Fringe* remains one of today's most fascinating explorations of a dysfunctional father-and-son 'relationship'.

BLU FOR YOU

Made in 1991, **Delicatessen** (13 September) is French whimsy/urban fantasy, set in yellow fogs of postwar rationing, centred on corner shop deli amidst city ruins, where survival depends on barter, while a butcher/serial killer carves up unlucky visitors to feed other conspiratorial tenants of his ramshackle residential building. Although its plot sounds like mean-spirited horror, this is a charming comedy of errors/manners, with a coterie of wonderfully appealing eccentrics (Dominique Pinon, as circus clown turned handyman Louison, makes a superb protagonist), spouting innuendo ("That's some tool!"), attempting suicide, maintaining civilities but practising cannibalism. As directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amélie*, *Minimacs*) and Marc Caro (*Dante 01*), this is like the 'zombie' rom-com with outlaw trog heroes that Terry Gilliam dreamt of once, but promptly forgot after waking up. Jeunet and Caro's similarly astounding *The City of Lost Children* (1995) is also very worthwhile entertainment.



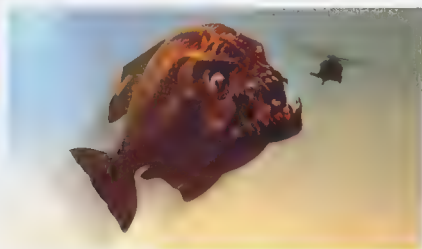
A superbly quirky live-action version of popular manga/anime fantasy, **Death Note 1 & 2** (20 September) are directed by Shusuke Kaneko (also the maker of underrated *Pyrokinesis*). *Death Note* and *Death Note 2: The Last Name* (Black Static #8) centre private detective stories and murder mystery plotlines on a book with occult power to kill anyone whose name is written down in it. Method and/or time of dispatch can be specified too, adding further layers of intrigue to fascinating study of



Remaining classification resistant and quite impossible to pigeonhole, David Lynch's millennial opus **Mulholland Drive** (13 September) is a mystery about murder and identity on the borders of sanity, abandons reason but not hope, in a convoluted story that effortlessly blends dreams with harsh realities all hinging upon Lynch's apparent fascination with Jungian psych. The fearlessly artistic filmmaker's ingenuity is utterly beguiling, as paired female characters (portrayed by Laura Elena Harring and Naomi Watts) switch from emotional transparency to morally opaque in a realm charting the mechanics of creating films in general, but film noir in particular, through overriding quests for dark/sinister moods and bright mesmerising images, whether the director intends various unsettling or magical visuals to be revelatory or illusory.

criminology and super-villainy versus antiheroic vigilante wish-fulfilments, with rogue demons (freaky 3D CGI) in both sinister and comedic modes. When the only effective defence against a sociopathic spree killer is complete social and political anonymity, survival in media saturated culture of modern Japan becomes a need for practical invisibility. The third film in this series, Hideo Nakata's curio *Death Note: L - Change the World* is more a franchise spin-off than narrative sequel, focusing entirely upon eccentric super-sleuth L's further adventures in crime-fighting.

ROUND-UP: WHEN VOIDS COLLIDE

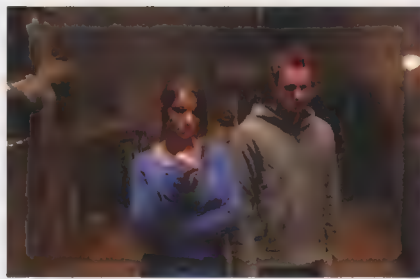


Like its silly-fi plot, fishy nonsense **Mega Piranha** (DVD, 9 August) is the result of a failed experiment. As previously seen in exceptionally daft monsterama *Mega Shark vs. Giant Octopus* (Interzone #224), it continues novelty casting of a 'retired teen pop star' as chief scientist on team assembled to combat giant creatures. In *MSvGO* there was Debbie Gibson. Here, it's redhead Tiffany's turn to spout inane/generic dialogue ("I just wanna kill them all!") instead of bubblegum song lyrics. Major problems with such 'mockbuster' flick product of The Asylum studios are found in lackadaisical pace of 'narrative' from preposterous action to ridiculous spectacle. Huge piranhas go from eating passengers on an Orinoco riverboat, and sinking a US warship, to demolishing a Venezuelan harbour. In terms of CGI 'quality control', afforded Asylum's obviously/determinedly subgenre movies, trainee grade output of visual effects is exponentially/execrably worse than imaginable. *Alien Abduction* (2005) director Eric Forsberg has done better no-budget work than *Mega Piranha*. There's a narrow grey area between knowingly trashy horror and filmmaking so blundering it insults sober viewers, but if you really want to see cardboard cut-out heroism battling against gigantic 'flying' fish, which (in a parody of *Jaws 2*) chew up a military helicopter, this is the DVD to rent!



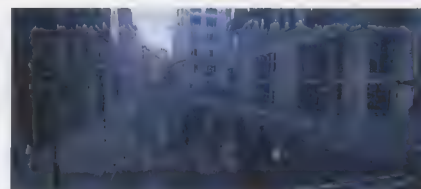
There are Roman legion remnants versus Pict guerrillas in Neil Marshall's *Gladiator* for splatterpunks **Centurion** (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 August). Beset by clunky dialogues

("You escaped the clutches of Gorlacon"), it's not a movie of strict historical accuracy, often striving to be so magnificently bloody that realism is cursory or abandoned. The writer-director's seeming attempt to avoid genre pigeonholing fails here, because he's misapplying the same low-budget pulp horror/action sensibility, honed making *Dog Soldiers* and *Doomsday*, to a British swordplay epic in what's essentially the heroic adventure format. It works only as nasty brutish farce where heads will roll before we get bad jokes – sometimes in a manner (one character is named Brick, without irony) that suggests a Monty Python influence on the script. We might've hoped for a tragic story steeped in pagan myths or Pictish lore. Instead, this follows a trend established by Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), scrupulously avoiding magic and surrealism of Boorman's classic *Excalibur* (1981) in favour of routine horrors with rural grunge. Obviously *King Arthur* had a grander budget (\$90 million against *Centurion*'s paltry £10 million), with a far superior cast. *Centurion* is mainly notable for the presence of Olga Kurylenko (vengeful Bond girl in *Quantum of Solace*) as mute Celt scout Etain, accustomed to savagery, but it's a role which lacks the (similarly amusing) impact of Keira Knightley's abrupt transformation of Guinevere, from romantic heroine to one of Merlin's blue-painted woad warriors, in *King Arthur*.



Micro-budget tedium is main characteristic of **Basement** (DVD, 23 August), a feeble attempted chiller starring Danny Dyer. Stuck in a seemingly disused military bunker, a bunch of stupid people run through a maze of corridors, cowering in darkness when they're not chattering inanely or arguing (without compromise or rationality) to lay blame for their somewhat dire situation. A hooded figure lurks in shadows, of course. There's blood on the walls, obviously. Plus night-vision POV shots for the mysterious unseen stalker. Aimless wandering about, only interrupted by slasher clichés, served up

as if even the filmmakers entertain doubts about narrative veracity of their 'action' set-pieces. Dreary pacing that is bereft of atmosphere results in nonstop mediocrity at best. To say more would be a waste of words, and your reading time. *Basement*: do not go there.



London's population of millions reduced, mysteriously, to just a handful, on deserted city streets, with no triffids in sight, and no zombies about. Disability for unlucky few 'survivors' is selective amnesia. Unbidden flashbacks reveal backstory via randomised clips of returning memory. The situation looks unlikely to be sci-fi apocalyptic, seems more like supernatural limbo. **The Last Seven** (DVD, 30 August) fields its vital clue, precisely timed, that all clocks and watches have stopped at the same moment. Jack is a soldier, played by a phenomenally busy Tamer Hassan (*Ferryman*, *Wrong Turn 3*). Chloe is a politician's daughter, vengeful Blake (Simon Phillips, *Cut*) is apparently the terrorist bomber who's provoked this otherworldly crisis of collective conscience. Oh, and Danny Dyer appears in a blindfold as... well, that would tell you too much. Novice director Imran Naqvi interweaves haunted character studies, gradually uncovering a horrible tragedy that prompted an uncanny judgement day on this unlikely group. It's a low-key British chiller that's occasionally effective but only moderately so. If you've seen any one of half a dozen or so mysteries of this sort (James Mangold's *Identity* is a good example), you can figure out what's happened and so easily guess the ending.

Hammer horror returns to screens with **Beyond the Rave** (DVD, 13 September), a movie-length edit of the 20-episode download previously serialised on MySpace. This has blatant appeal to curious fans of the famous British studios' gothic output (which, except for 1980's uneven TV series *Hammer House of Horror*, ended in mid-1970s), but offers nothing of genre interest or production values to please discerning viewers. It's all gone Pete Tong... Annoyingly brash editing, strong language, cheap gore, strip club aggro, soldier on leave (haunted by nightmare

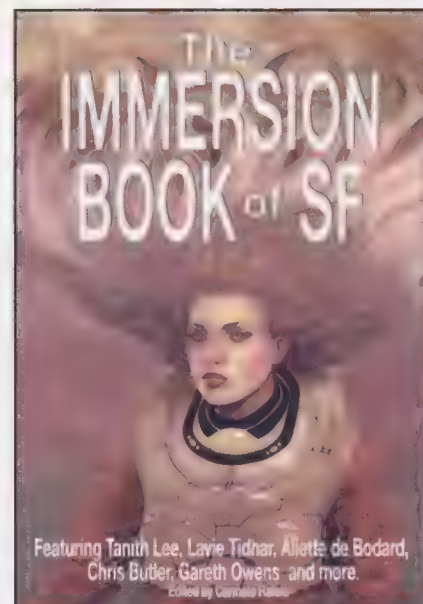
Iraqi suicide bomber) attends the sekrit rave where vampires (serving pills laced with immortal blood) massacre dance floor crowd in harvest exsanguinations. Edgy drama calls for top pro actors, not poor amateurish casting (plus guest cameos: Tamer Hassan, Sadie Frost, Ingrid Pitt – just to snare unwarily curious horror fans) presented here. There's vampire romance (like *True Blood*, not *Buffy*), and some inept slayers but, when storyline fails, or whenever in doubt, another chase through the woods is staged. Of course, hapless lead vampire Melech (Sebastian Knapp) burns up/explodes at sunrise, while hearse driver 'Necro' gets off with wannabe seductress Lilith (Lois Winstone, Ray's daughter), for pending sequel. Actually, this has almost nothing to do with Hammer, in style or content. Disc extras include campy short film *The Curse of Castle Nymphenstein* that stars Emily Booth (*Evil Aliens*).



Lame and lousy Brit horror, **Cherry Tree Lane** (DVD, 13 September) aims for bog-standard home-invasion shocks, but churns through its desultory tale of brazen dull/witless 'gangsta' thugs that interrupt a couple's evening meal, looking for their errant son. Paul Andrew Williams (*The Cottage, London to Brighton*) directs, without any hint of subtlety, this uninteresting and entirely pointless exercise in crass ramblings ("Fuck it, don't matter anyway") by yobs, where attempted creation of tensions fails to precipitate horror, because most of the violence occurs off-screen, making this an obvious *Funny Games* wannabe. Not even enraged husband's attacks on the youths, in supposed *Last House on the Left* styled revenge, carries any dramatic charge, as action sequence is badly framed and relegated to background. It seems a project for which the filmmakers might have been trying to present the headlong culture clash between middle class suburbanites and yob culture as some kind of zeitgeist of 21st century social commentary. But, no...it's only a laughably aimless and utterly boring mess.

We used to see techno-terrors with roughly an ounce of amusing plot for every gallon of stage blood yet, nowadays, in the wake of *Saw* franchise success and the boundless popularity of live-video immediacy, micro-budget quickies such as "broadcast murder show" **Death Tube** (DVD, 20 September), wherein enormous tedium is initiated by jaded media pundits, has become the new 21st century norm. Snuff-movie appeal has replaced distinctively confrontational storytelling, based on three-act structures, with merely infantile reasons for 'game' players to engage in acts of deadly farce. For some horror filmmakers, necessity of on-screen killings that are entirely free of suspense is even more vital than genre cinema's traditional fondness for sex appeal ("US version has lots of chicks," comments online 'feedback' on this crazy online contest). From manipulative chitchats to hysterical begging, *Death Tube* (aka: *X Game*) posits a zero value on life, except as disposable commodity in sadistic sport, where dimwit Internet users are drawn into risky challenges and ludicrous dares, jumping through – sometimes peculiarly Japanese – hoops to beat implausible odds and survive yet another puzzle/stupidity test/obstacle race. Real ordeal, though, is for DVD viewers, getting to finish line of *Chanbara Beauty* director Yôhei Fukuda's ineffectual, irritating, and brainless 'satire'.

Ahead of this year's *Piranha 3D* we have Australian monster movie with 'prehistoric' killer fish, **Mega Shark of the Malibu** (aka: *Malibu Shark Attack*), unleashed on DVD, 20 September. Directed with zero respect for viewers' patience by David Lister, this TV feature provides fun-in-sun antics for holiday frolickers that soon fall victim to hungry terrors – partly, perhaps, due to a standard of acting that makes *BayWatch* seem like a high-minded solemn drama. Luckless star Peta Wilson (of TV series *La Femme Nikita*) plays heroine amongst fidgety/panicky lifeguards hunted by goblin sharks after tidal wave resulting from an undersea quake floods beachfront, turning Malibu coastline into disaster area (cue stock footage of tsunami damage). Fins in the water, and blood too. It's a job for 'International Rescue', but nothing could save this DVD from going straight into bargain bins. This is exactly the kind of production that gives CGI a bad name. Any genre fans that watch this, on purpose, are advised to seek urgent reputation laundering from their local spin-doctor.



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54-55

THE FIRST MUTANT POPCORN
(#13, AUTUMN 1985)

BRAZIL

NIGHT OF THE COMET

TRANCERS

GHOU LIES

56-59

NICK LOWE: IN THE FUTURE, WE'LL
HAVE SUMMER ALL YEAR ROUND
by JONATHAN McCALMONT

60-64

THE LATEST MUTANT POPCORN
(#230, SEP-OCT 2010)

INCEPTION

THE TWILIGHT SAGA: ECLIPSE

TOY STORY 3

PREDATORS

SPICE

CATS AND DOGS: THE REVENGE
OF KITTY GALORE

THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

THE LAST AIRBENDER



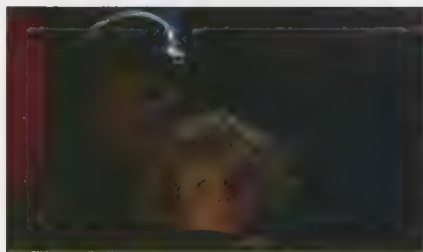
1985

THIS YEAR, IT'S THE ALIENS. THEY come from the apocalyptic future (*The Terminator*, *Trancers*), from the antediluvian past (*Baby*, *Iceman*), or just from somewhere Out There (*Repo Man*, *2010*, *Starman*, *Lifeforce*). They don't always look much – a bright light off camera, a big black monolith, the appalling Jeff Bridges doing his Oscar-nominated impression of a robot chicken – and most are pretty inscrutable (“He shouted ‘Greetings’ and melted my lugwrench”). Some are cute, a few are nasty, some are just misunderstood: if they blow up Jupiter, or lurk in the trunks of cars and vaporise Californians to a pair of smoking cowboy boots, it's to warn us against tampering with forces that may not be commanded. Yet if we're willing to learn, they will give us of their cosmic wisdom (“You know what I find beautiful about your species? You are at your best when things are worst.” Gee, thanks, *Starman*) or their gifts (“All these worlds are yours, except Europa.” Well, I dunno, we actually kind of had our eye on Europa...). The strange thing is, deep down, they're not so different from us. How else to explain their pervasive fascination with Los Angeles, CA? their passion, seemingly instinct, for the earthling sport of car chases? their curious drive to impregnate our females? (“Your child will grow up knowing everything I know. He will be – a teacher.”)

Perhaps it's simply that Hollywood sf has lately struck a peculiarly sterile patch, with the major series all dead or in suspended

animation. This is the first summer for eight years with no *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Conan*, or *Indiana Jones* blockbuster to get bums on seats across the world, and it's hard to see how the UK's recent upsurge in cinema admissions is going to be sustained on what's around. So far as the majors go, the fashions are twofold. On the one hand, there are the icky sword & sorcery juveniles (*Neverending Story*, *Ladyhawke*, *Legend*, *The Black Cauldron*), all of which latter three I tip to follow the first to box office oblivion. Otherwise, slightly more laudably, there are the well-meaning but lacklustre follow-ups to films that can't be followed, with *Return to Oz* now joining *Psycho II* and *2010* in the archive of the world's strangest mistakes. Where will it lead? *Gone With the Wind: The Struggle Continues?* *Citizen Kane II?* (“Hi, my name's Rosebud. Any messages for me?”)

And yet, outside Hollywood, the desert still casts up strange blooms. What America will make of *Brazil* on its September release there remains to be pondered, but the surreal mix of nightmare comedy and farcical horror might just be marketable as modish Brit loopiness despite its poor performance at home. There hasn't been a film like it, and unless it makes a packet Stateside it's unlikely anyone will trust a fruitcake like Gilliam with that much money and that much artistic control again. But by any standards it's a sublime creation: a visionary world of soaring dottiness, magnificently sustained in a two-and-a-half-hour cascade of extravagantly inventive images, yet anchored in a sharp script (main credit here to the Stoppard rewrite) and some



cherishable performances. Contemporary audiences, cynically used to watching screenfuls of money catch light ("Crumbs! Bet that cost them") come out of *Brazil* with steam pouring out of their diodes. For weeks after, nothing else, however good, looks quite like a movie.

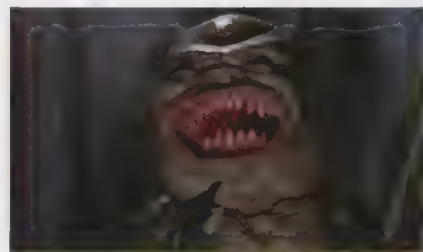
Even in America, things aren't entirely bleak. From *Android* and *Liquid Sky* to this year's *Repo Man*, *Trancers*, and *Night of the Comet*, we've seen an irregular stream of low-budget American independent sf features from first-time writer-directors, of which none has made much dent on the commercial box office, but all have managed a respectable degree of critical success and cult popularity, and springboarded their creators to more ambitious projects. All the above five are wittily scripted and engagingly performed, with final scenes of such preposterous charm that you cheerfully overlook the occasional longeurs and iffy sexual politics that went before. But the interesting link is that the appeal of all five depends on a sophisticated mix of faux-naïf entertainment with sly genre-subversive irony. The science-fictional ideas are tendentiously second-hand, heavily derivative on the celluloid equivalent of pulp – in this case mainly UFO and doomsday movies of the 50s.

What we're witnessing, in fact, is a renaissance of the B-movie tradition. For the first time since the decline of the double bill the movie industry has a relatively buoyant and stable market for low-cost entertainment features that wouldn't recoup their costs on theatrical release alone. What's more, the increasingly complex business relations between video, television, and theatrical release, all fed from the same broad pool of product, mean that not all the theatrically-budgeted releases make it to the big screen (witness *Iceman*), and not all the cheap stuff is confined to the video shop. What distinguishes the new B-movie from its traditional forebears is its cinematic self-consciousness: its address to an art-house or late-night audience appreciative of styles, conventions, nostalgias.



A case in point is Thom Eberhart's **Night of the Comet**, whose only name stars are – shrewdly – Mary Woronov and Robert Beltran from *Eating Raoul*. Here we have the human race reduced to red dust overnight by the rays of a rogue comet, and the only survivors are those who spend the fatal night entirely enclosed by steel. (Note the deliberate trash science.) If the protection is partial, you dissolve slowly into a homicidal zombie and then die anyway. In LA (where else?) the only survivors are a pair of goofy teenage sisters, who romp round empty department stores to 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun', and fight over the last man in California, who happens to be a rather humpy trucker. But out in the desert a secret military base has survived – sort of – and has sinister plans for our heroines... Well, the plot logic has holes the size of a small Balkan state, and a lot of it's pretty dumb; but this is essential to the style, and the end-of-the-world fantasy is surprisingly well evoked considering the budget, with moody filter shots of empty flyovers and silent city streets. It's nowhere near as funny as *Repo Man*, nor as snappily directed or stylishly performed. But the inspiration is similar, and it's amiable for many of the same reasons.

Or take **Trancers**: a loose reworking of the *Terminator* setup – invincible assassin from future trying to change his history, chased by avenging agent who falls awkwardly in love with his own grandmaw or similar – but with jokier touches in place of the textbook-slick suspense, and some gratuitous technogimmickry and psionics to pep up the thrill-power. The resulting hodgepodge is absurdly contrived, with plot



devices carelessly tossed in all over, but in their very sloppiness the undisguised genre plagiarisms rather add to the B-movie appeal, engagingly sent up by the unshaven Marlowesque hero "Jack Deth". Sad that *Trancers'* director, Charles Band, is also the producer of **Ghoulies**, a meritless occult cheapie with four bendy rubber demons whose articulation would be scoffed at by Sooty and Sweep inserted in the script at an obviously late point to make it look like a *Gremlins* clone. See: the walking dead with the tongue that strangles! See: green contact lenses that won't stay in place! See: forces of evil lurking beneath the bogseat! (This scene unfortunately not in the actual film.)

In their different ways, these films define the new B-movie: unpretentious entertainment pictures with modest production values, unknown or at best unbankable stars, and a knowing use of genre clichés. All these are qualities particularly calculated to appeal in a medium terminally afflicted with hype, blockbuster megabudgets, superstar heroes, and an imaginative starvation that seems to be driving big-money cinema into a kind of frantic autocannibalism in quest of substance. It's hard not to warm to films like this whatever their faults, especially when set against the much more expensive (and dull) Hollywood B-movies like *Starman* and *Runaway*, which are every bit as derivative but take themselves far more seriously, the junk art dressed up in cosmetic moralising about xenophilia and technophobia.

Still, it would be a mistake to overrate this stuff as though it were some kind of ciné-punk nouvelle vague. Refreshing as it may be to see the B-movie alive and thrashing, it'd be nice now and again to see a glimpse of the odd A-movie. I have modestly high hopes of *Mad Max 3*, and cautiously of Peter Greenaway's long-awaited *Zoo* – which promises, among other delights, rhinos rampaging through Amsterdam and a pair of separated Siamese twins who want to be sewn back together. It may or may not be sf, but it's wild, wild cinema: maniac with camera, loving the alien. **Nick Lowe**

NICK LOWE

In The Future, We'll Have Summer All Year Round

BY JONATHAN McCALMONT

SCIENCE FICTION USED TO BE ABOUT THE FUTURE. From the Edwardian futurism of Wells to Gibson's collapsing American empire, science fiction spent a century waiting in the wings for the moment when all eyes would turn and all ears would finally open to its myriad speculations. Science fiction was to be the literature of tomorrow, but tomorrow seemingly never came and sf remained a niche interest.

However, move from the bookshop to the cinema and the picture could not be any more different. The facts are that three of the four most financially successful films of all time are works of science fiction. Of the twenty best grossing films, sixteen could be categorised as 'genre' and eleven as straight science fiction. Every summer, cinemas around the world become clogged with works of sf. Works of sf so heavily marketed that they come to dominate the cultural landscape in a way that even the most successful mainstream literary authors could never hope to achieve. In modern Britain, to walk down a high street is to be assaulted with sfnal imagery and cast adrift in a sea of genetically engineered freaks, giant robotic AIs, alien wars, space battles and futuristic technologies. In the twenty first century, sf surrounds us. It speaks to us. It speaks of us. There has never been a better time to be a lover of science fiction. The geek is (apparently) king. But for those of us with enough of an interest in written science fiction to be buying a magazine like *Interzone*, going to the cinema can still be a terrifyingly frustrating experience. Indeed, while we may recognise the likes of *E.T.*, *Terminator* and *Avatar* as sf, they are not really examples of *our* sf. Their stories are not the kinds of stories that make us subscribe to magazines and import US hardbacks. To read the likes of McDonald, Ryman, Miéville or Egan before going to the cinema is to feel somehow cheated. Deprived. Taunted. And so fans of literary sf are trapped, trapped between the sense of elation that accompanies a moment of cultural hegemony and the feeling that nothing going on on the big

I think Nick Lowe is the single most insightful and intelligent film critic working in the industry today. He takes an outsider's viewpoint equally distanced from the recycled PR of the mainstream and the ivory tower academics of specialist magazines. He's a graceful prose stylist, and I'd love someone to publish a collection of his pieces.

Christopher Fowler



> Nick Lowe

screen is ever quite as good as it should be.

It is an interesting time to be a fan of sf and interesting times tend to find a way of speaking with a clear voice. A voice that perfectly captures the spirit of the time. A voice that articulates a culture with perfect clarity and understanding. The voice of this particular place and time belongs to Nick Lowe.

Not that he'd ever admit to it.

When I ask Lowe how he feels about keeping a genre film column going for all of twenty five years, he responds with a degree of shock that anyone in their right mind might consider this an achievement, let alone the kind of achievement that leads to you being interviewed. "If I'd known I was signing up for a 25-year indenture I'd have eaten my own head" he quips before adding "I just thought of it all as ephemera; still do, really". It is initially tempting to see this streak of self-deprecation as being a question of frame of reference. After all, Lowe is not only *Interzone's* resident film columnist, he is also an accomplished critic and scholar in his own right. Indeed, his hilariously perceptive critique of fantasy plotting techniques 'The Well-Tempered Plot Device' is one of the most widely-cited works of genre criticism ever produced and his works on classical narratives have allowed him

not only to forge a successful career as an academic, but also to make a number of appearances on Melvin Bragg's Thursday morning Radio 4 boffin slot *In Our Time*. What are a load of old film reviews to the man who has sung the Mary Beard on live radio? When I ask Lowe about the differences and relationships between his different intellectual careers, his rejection of compartmentalisation is emphatic:

"It's all one disorder. Classicists often end up in fandom and fans often end up as classicists; it's the joy of sadness. There's a sense of ownership of a vast but clearly bounded databank of mind-exploding narrative that makes the horizons of direct experience seem impossibly tiny by comparison."

This response came quite early on in my conversation with Nick but as I read through my notes and our emails I am drawn back to it again and again as I come to realise the extent to which it distills the 'Mutant Popcorn Experience'. This understanding of genre, film, academia and fan culture as a single cultural entity underpinned by a shared but constantly evolving set of aesthetic principles not only informs all of Lowe's film writing, it also explains why Lowe's criticism seems so perfectly suited to a cultural climate dominated by science fictional imagery.

As Lowe says:

"There's a reason geeks have inherited the Earth. We were Slan all along."

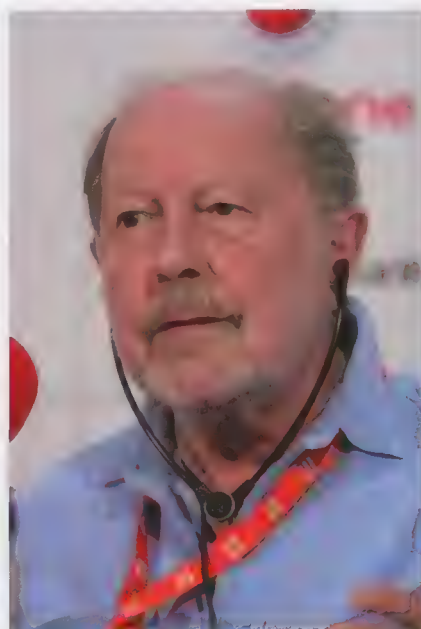
Of course, there was a time when we did not realise this.

As Lowe himself pointed out when discussing the *Star Wars Special Edition* re-releases, the *Star Wars* trilogy marked something of a sea-change in the history of genre film making. Before *Star Wars*, science fiction was the stuff of B-movies and exploitation films. Cheerily low-budget trash pumped out by studios looking to wring a few quick bucks from some old costumes and a few back lot sets. Though *Mutant Popcorn's* first appearance in *Interzone* #13 post-dates the release of the first *Star Wars* film by nearly a decade, that sense of genre film as something cheap and cheerful still pervades Lowe's early columns, littered as they are with such backhanded praise as "sublime idiocy", "genuine daffiness" and "mad genius".

Indeed, while many mainstream and art house film critics have latched onto the political and the technical aspects of film as means of singing the praises of their preferred works, Lowe is one of the few film writers to champion the aesthetic primacy of silliness. Silliness not as a weakness but as a strength. Silliness born of the knowledge "that sf is most fully itself



> Andrei Tarkovsky "was a god, one of the real gods" (Andrei Tarkovsky Museum)



> Nicolas Roeg "is a front for God" (Petr Novák)

in its written forms" and that the low-budget and half-arsed B-picture realities of genre film making mean that amused and ironic detachment is absolutely central to the cinema experience of most genre fans.

"It's the enduring legacy of a coping mechanism all sf readers develop to deal with sf film, a kind of callousing of the aesthetic mandibles and compensatory opening-up of the pleasure receptors to daftness. We all make our peace one way or another with the fact that film is hopelessly, hilariously bad at delivering the intellectual payloads of sf, while being fantastically powerful at distilling the experiential part. So sf fans were among the earliest settlers of the postmodern noosphere, because we'd be reading John Sladek and Ian Watson and then have to scrape our brains back into our skulls to go out and watch Brian Blessed dangling off a wire with a plastic ray gun."

This willingness to not merely tolerate creative stupidity but to actively celebrate it stood Lowe in excellent stead once the Hollywood juggernaut began to turn. The success of franchises such as *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *Star Trek* or individual films like *E.T.* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* meant that suddenly genre film found itself catapulted from grind house flea pit to suburban multiplex as budgets swelled and a thousand green lights were flicked on by producers desperate to cash in on the next big thing.

"The diaspora of sf into the wider culture is driven by a series of corporate discoveries about how just much money could be made from it, right back to that moment around 1968 when US publishers started paying quite decent advances for sf and it became possible for good-selling writers to be quite comfortably off, with sometimes rather unhappy consequences for the actual quality of their output. The rise and rise and rise of sf cinema, to the unbelievable point where seven of the top ten films are fantasy blockbusters of one kind or another, has been propelled by the belated recognition that sf owns the most powerful narrative experiences and film is slowly catching up with text as a vehicle for their delivery, even if it's still decades behind."

As Hollywood directors followed Hollywood budgets into the arena of genre, Lowe's engagement with silliness as an aesthetic principle began to deepen and a more profound understanding of the process of film making began to infuse his columns. An understanding hilariously fixated upon the daily travails of one Steven Allan Spielberg.

The critic Harold Bloom wrote a book called *The Anxiety of Influence*, in which he suggested that every writer or artist has someone who influences them, with whom they struggle to prove themselves, and if strong enough over overcome him or her. Many of us reading this can relate to that: there's always someone who makes us sigh in despair – not because their work is bad (though that would be a different sigh of despair) but because it is so good. So good that we wonder why we try to produce work ourselves. How can we possibly compete?

Of the film critics who specialise in the genres of sf, fantasy or horror, it's safe to say that Nick Lowe is the most underrated. Unlike Kim Newman, say, or Mark Kermode, or Peter Nicholls, or the late Philip Strick and John Brosnan, he hasn't ventured into broadcasting or had any books published. (A collection of his reviews is very long overdue.) As far as I'm aware, *Interzone* has been his only outlet.

He's been contributing to the magazine longer than I've been reading it, but his column is as often as not one of the first parts of the magazine I look at every month. The best criticism has an individual voice, and Lowe has that: it can be read purely for the pleasure in the writing, even if you disagree with him. But more often than not, I do find myself agreeing with him, and wishing that I could have said that as well but knowing that I couldn't.

Gary Couzens

Like most film critics, Nick has his pet directors. Tarkovsky "was a god, one of the real gods" and Nic Roeg is "a front for God" while Scorsese could "charm the underwear off your loins without undoing a button" and Paul Verhoeven's "injection of continental talent has fabulously invigorated the genre". Spielberg, on the other hand, is presented as an amiable stooge; an undeniably talented chap whose singular talent for cinematic spectacle in no way stops him from being dragooned by the studio system into crow-barring unbearably mawkish sentimentality and therapy-speak into otherwise perfectly serviceable scripts:

"Uh, ah...right away, sir...if we maybe

insert an 'I love you, dad' just after 'Holy shit, my brain's exploding'..."

Or, as Lowe puts it in *Interzone* #53:

"Any historical myth that moves is likely to get snapped up, remodelled as a duff facsimile of Indiana Jones, and its original sociopolitical propellant replaced by some methanous twaddle about guys' problems with their fathers. (By God, when I'm censor these films will burn. Passing utterances of 'I love you' will be either bleeped out or humanely overdubbed as 'eat my shorts'. All references to fathers, especially by Kevin Costner, will be punished by compulsory infibulation of the head. We have a duty to protect the impressionable.)"

This depiction of one of the twentieth century's greatest and most successful directors as a victim of bureaucratic happenstance and a 1980s Family Values crusade is not only a fantastic deconstruction of the myth of the director-as-auteur that pervades so much post-War film criticism, it is also an image that sits at the heart of Lowe's vision of how genre films get made. While the roots of this bureaucratic vision of film making are already present in early editions on *Mutant Popcorn*, it is not until *Interzone* #136 that Lowe fully articulates it:

"*Lost in Space* is a movie that has been produced beyond all human reason into a kind of transcendental dream state. Akiva Goldsman's name is on script and production, but even more than usually for a summer movie this is a film with a highly distributed web of authorship, a product of evolution rather than design, in which studio man's perverse fixations are granted unfettered play that borders on the surreal."

For Lowe, genre film making is an undertaking comparable to that of building the pyramids. Hollywood's genre output has become so expensive and so technically complicated that human agency no longer plays any part in the actual creative process. Films are no longer made, they are hewn by a multitude of environmental, cultural, social and economic forces too broad and too complex to afford the luxury of concepts as humble and humanistic as 'responsibility' or 'artistic vision'. Genre films are not works of art that set out to explore particular ideas, they are vast bureaucracies that acquire what meaning they have only through the gravitational pull they exert on the culture that surrounds them.

As films move through the production process, they are subject to waves of

staffing and script changes. Various directors, actors, technicians, writers and producers attach and detach themselves from the project and while none of these humans can be said to be ultimately responsible for the film that eventually gets made, all of them leave their mark thereby allowing ideas and trends to become snagged in the production process like plastic bags on a length of chain-link fence. This process of memetic accretion is particularly evident in the way in which film and TV uncritically internalised the precepts of psychoanalysis just as Freud's theory shed the final tattered remains of its scientific credibility. Lowe suggests in *Interzone* #45 that this "arises from the prominence of therapy in the cultural group that happens to dominate the entertainment, and particularly the screenwriting, industry. It certainly seems to have become orthodoxy in screenwriting courses up and down the nation's colleges that films are about individuals going through personal crises that bring them to a better understanding of themselves."

Genre film is not merely part of a different medium to literary genre. It is part of an entirely different category of human undertakings. Attempts at engaging with such undertakings using traditional Aristotelian concepts like 'plot' or 'character' are inevitably doomed to failure. Having amused himself in an earlier column with the idea of a piece of automated script-generating software, *Interzone* #121 sees Lowe writing about *Dramatica*, a real piece of software that attempted to codify the aesthetic formulae that supposedly determine the levels of success that confer the much sought-after blockbuster status. Having read the book laying out these formulae, Lowe is horrified to discover that the authors had effectively remapped "everyday words whose meaning you thought you knew into an unearthly Anglo-Martian creole."

But while most traditional scholarly approaches to film analysis seem comically ill-suited to understanding the genre blockbuster phenomenon, the same cannot be said of the geeks who actually pay money to see them. Consider Lowe's remarks on *Pirates of the Caribbean 3: At World's End* in *Interzone* #211:

"[It] may be the harbinger of a new form of cinema or may simply be the last of the dinosaurs: an unremitting typhoon of plotting that carries its viewers off the edge of the known world and back again, across an ocean of intertwined pursuits

The first thing I turn to in *Interzone* is the movie review page. I'd lay odds that almost every long-time reader of the magazine does the same, no matter how they might say that they buy *Interzone* because it's dedicated primarily to fiction, as opposed to the film/TV/comics bias of every other UK publication with science fiction as its remit. Even the sternest literary purist, of the type who doesn't own a television set and is proud never to have seen anything associated with the *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* franchises, turns to Nick Lowe's pages first.

Why?

It's not just interest in what's happening in sf (and, by association, fantasy) cinema, it's the quality of the insight – from an unusually well-informed point of view – and the writing. It's easy to underestimate the latter. The science fiction field is full of opinionated, interesting, well-read, cine-literate folk who can argue about movies for hours, but still aren't capable of putting a couple of sentences together. Nick Lowe is the sort of critic you can read even if you have no intention of seeing the movies he reviews. He puts in the work – unusually, he often checks out the previous drafts of screenplays which leak onto the internet before discussing the finished film which eclipses these ghosts – and he actually shows up in real cinemas to watch *Race to Witch Mountain* (with Dwayne 'Don't Call Me "The Rock"' Johnson) or *U.F.O.* (with Roy 'Chubby' Brown).

The last twenty five years have been busy in genre movies, and Nick Lowe has been there, front and centre, paying attention.

Kim Newman

and double-crosses to a final vertiginous descent into an all-consuming maelstrom of ending. [...] Its makers are under the sincere impression that they know what they're doing, and that what they think they're doing is inventing a new post-classical language of film plotting for audiences trained to handle huge uptakes of information at previously unimaginable speeds."

The reason for the emergence of these new story-telling techniques is just that

cinema-going audiences are increasingly hip to genre modes of exposition, it is that our culture's basic narrative unit is no longer that of the story but that of the brand. The series. The world. The Megatext. From *Interzone* #216:

"Actual storyline is often less important than the potential to generate immersive or interactive material, with a major consideration in acquisitions for film being the reducibility of the universe's essential narrative to a simplified plot space that can be navigated in the form of a spinoff game. [...] In this new poetics of the franchise, the texture of the world is more valuable than its narrative contents, and what happens to the characters in their universe is often fairly secondary."

The reason why geeks have inherited the Earth is because this new hermeneutic environment is very similar to the one that we call home. We love our world-building. We love our narratives that play out over dozens of volumes and tens of thousands of pages. We love to immerse ourselves in entirely fictional worlds.

"It's completely inescapable now that, for academic discourse to cope with the cognitive overload of 21st-century cultural production, academics need to learn to think like fanboys: to be able to navigate vast bodies of media data from the inside, and internalise the language of the tribe. That's why nobody who comes to sf late in life ever gets it in the way that people do who've grown up with it as a first language. Same with comics."

One of the reasons why so many genre films leave a bitter taste in the mouth is because for many genre readers, science fiction is about so much more than efficient info-dumping and bloated megatexts. For many of us, the value of science fiction lies in its capacity to combine a literary perspective with an engagement with abstract and weird ideas. But as Lowe points out, these are precisely the aspects of the genre experience that film struggles to replicate. With the Hollywood genre bubble giving no indication of bursting and the summer blockbuster release period expanding ever-outwards towards a single equatorial Christmas-to-Christmas release window, the summer of genre now lasts nearly all year long. There is no shade in which to hide from the merciless Hollywood sun but there are a few oases. Oases carefully mapped over a period of twenty five years by Nick Lowe, a film critic better equipped than any to help us deal with this unbearable heat. ■



2010

SEPTEMBER 2009. AN UNSETTLED morning: I keep dreaming I've got up, only to wake woozily and find myself still in bed before drifting off again. Finally I struggle out of bed and run a bath, then head back to the bedroom for a towel. The door to my daughter's room is open as I pass. "Morning," says a blonde, middle-aged female cyclops in a bathchair. "Morning," I nod back, glum realisation sinking in.

December 2008. I'm at a festival where I have to play bass in an Afro-funk gig. I've never picked up a bass in my life, but with some help from the roadie, Seth Rogen, I get up on stage, only to find that the bass is played like a Chapman stick by tapping with the fingers of both hands – and not on the strings, but on the amplifier lead. To my relief, this produces a moderately convincing sound; but the performance is disrupted by a large, very stupid dog bounding around out of control at the front of the stage while its owner calls vainly to it: "Voldemort! Voldemort!"

August 1963. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King is winding down what has so far been a less than humdum speech when Mahalia Jackson, standing nearby, senses the crowd wants something more: "Tell them about your dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!" King rises historically to the occasion: "I had this really important speech to deliver in Washington, but I couldn't find my trousers..."

Not long ago, it would have been easy

to feel sure that none of these things happened; but the signs are mounting that the dreaming world has taken over reality. Where other summer films fade into forgetting, **Inception** just spins and spins. Like the first Joe Chip penny turning up in your change, makers of subliminal sleep-affirmation audio programs are starting to rebrand their products as "inception" apps. But the most glaring clue that we're still in the shared universe of Christopher Nolan's dream is that by any waking analysis *Inception* looks for all the world like a big old flop. On its surface levels, it's an enormous white elephant, one of those doomed private follies that the studio lets you make when you're king of the world and then spend the rest of your life living down. Its premise is cobbler, its plot perfunctory, the characters cutouts, dialogue stiff, motivations formulaic; the first hour of the film is spent explaining a system of cumbersome, ad hoc, and ultimately nonsensical rules; and its affectation of intellectual and emotional seriousness is mere posturing, and even the moments of expensive visual audacity are quite sparingly rationed and rather tame when they come. Repeat viewings add little beyond detail-spotting; there isn't really much more to understand than you get the first time, whereas the holes in the fabric become all the more evident. Even the final enigma is no real enigma (since one disambiguation makes near-total sense and the other next to none), so much as a weak attempt to roll together the two obvious endings into something that's only interesting because it avoids committing outright to either of two letdowns. But you'd

never dream that from the mass groan of appreciative disappointment in packed IMAX houses at the final cut to black.

As science fiction, it barely even pretends to try. Nolan appears not to have the faintest clue about the science of dreaming; there's no sign of even distant familiarity with the past sixty years of dream research, and at times you find yourself wondering whether the man has ever actually had a dream himself. Even viewers whose appreciation of the narratology of dreams is limited to their own private experience of sleep theatre know that the real dreaming mind is strongly reactive and only weakly purposive; memory and ratiocination are inhibited; identity is labile, continuity plastic, and even practised lucid dreamers have trouble sustaining environments and narratives beyond the momentary episode or impulse. Whereas in *Paprika* – the film *Inception* most obviously isn't – the dreamers used the malleability of their shared dream environments and their identities within this to surreal but purposeful narrative effect, the dreams in *Inception* are unnaturally solid, stable, and rational.

For a film so completely made of expensive, it's also cheekily unconcerned with conventional Hollywood notions of character and emotion, to the point where it allows the camera to sit in on the cast's own brainstorming meetings where they apply bottom-line Hollywood story formula to planning the film's mind-heist: "Subconscious is motivated by emotion, not reason. We need to translate this into an emotional concept." "How do you translate a business concept into an emotion?" "What you have to do is start with the absolute basics, the relationship with his father. Positive emotion trumps negative." If you didn't know you were dreaming, you'd think they were having a laugh. Even Cobb's own driving emotional need, which gave Nolan such trouble over the years, has ended up being supplied by the same old dead-family guilt and custody angst that he's used in various combinations in *Memento*, *Dark Knight*, and especially *The Prestige* – whose great final scene *Inception*'s recycles so directly as even to include the same actor. It's not that Nolan can't do real inner space when he puts his peculiar mind to it: the script he wrote between *Memento* and the first version of *Inception* was an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's creepy London psychodrama *The Keys to the Street*, which remains in limbo. But even that turned on a central act of prestige digitation, a seemingly impossible identity switch

achieved by misdirecting the audience's default assumptions about the conventions of editing so satisfyingly destabilised in the *Solaris*-inspired final sequence here.

For *Inception*'s kick is that when the lift doors open it isn't really a film about dreams, or people, or anything real-world at all. The sf premise is a flag of convenience for one of Nolan's maddest voyages in pure narrative poetics, a crazed enterprise that sets out to leverage what is in effect the world's first formalist blockbuster. *Inception* is a film about the creation of narrative itself, with a team whose key roles map obviously on to those of production designer, scenarist, and director; and it uses the grammar and imagery of genre cinema to investigate the as yet undreamed-of narrative forms towards which new media and new film technologies are groping: totally immersive, experiential, and multisensory, to the point where the audience is unaware that they're in a story at all; and in which linear narrative is superseded by the emerging arts of vertical plotting, which reconceive story as a gamelike system of separate yet interdependent levels or layers that must be negotiated in a hierarchy of embedded tasks. The result is the first implementation in any medium of a narrative concatenance John Barth dreamed of nearly forty years ago in *Chimera* as a Xanadu of the fabulative arts: "a series of, say, seven concentric stories-within-stories, so arranged that the climax of the innermost would precipitate that of the next tale out, and that of the next, et cetera, like a string of firecrackers or a chain of orgasms." With immodest humility, *Inception* settles for five, but with the additional device of multiplicative timelines at deeper levels of embedding, and with a brilliantly meretricious pretence that depth of embedding itself is both important and dangerous – that the deeper you go, the deeper the film and its characters get, and the more perilous the return. It's utter bollocks, but at least they're the gonads of genius; it's a very hard film not to enjoy, repeatedly, and has caught something about how our whole sense of narrative is changing, in ways that are deeply threatening to traditional Hollywood rules of story. Nolan has recently been sighted discreetly circling José Carlos Somosa's dire postmodern historical *The Athenian Murders*, lured no doubt by its *Prestige*-like layered narrative and its bogus semiotic theory. He'll have his work cut out, but at the moment it seems the man can get away with anything. That's usually how you know you're dreaming.



Layers of secondary dreaming are less surefootedly negotiated in **The Twilight Saga: Eclipse**, which occupies an uncomfortable space in its series: the most assured and engaging of the books, with a strong no-nonsense storyline picking up from vol. 1, but with some unfortunate distractions that David Slade's instalment of the rapid-turnaround film franchise struggles to overcome. The most remarkable comes from Stephenie Meyer herself, whose unfinished *Midnight Sun* and this year's *Bree Tanner* "Eclipse novella" have invented a curious new genre of what is essentially authorial fan fiction for her own series: new stories written into, around, and behind scenes from her earlier novels, using different voices and viewpoints and untold character backstory to open up counter-narratives that sometimes thicken, sometimes undermine the canonical storyline. Nowhere is this more striking than with *Bree*, which tells the story leading up to the climax of *Eclipse* through the eyes of the minor character of a vampire "newborn", a footsoldier in the Seattle bloodsucker army who becomes the focus of a climactic confrontation between the saintly Cullens and their creepy vampire overlords the Volturi. On its own terms, the novella has an effective and rather haunting *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* arc as its heroine, a very low-level pawn in a much bigger game, comes to intuit that there are several layers of narrative nested around her, and that her own role is a lie within a lie, yet without ever grasping, let alone playing her own part in, the real story before the final kick. *Bree's Short Second Life* is narrated in the first person and past tense, which is a bit of an eyebrow-raiser for a reader who knows her fate at the end of *Eclipse*, and the novella's own final page does nothing to lower them. Both the original novel and the film cut away at the climax to sickened reaction shots from Bella and her team, though Melissa Rosenberg's actual script is gorily explicit about what happens. But

then Rosenberg herself appears not to have had access to the text of *Bree*, which was only circulated subsequently to the cast during production – where it must have confused them mightily, since it reveals that the Volturi scene from the script and film can't possibly have taken place, and that everyone in the climactic scene is talking in previously unsuspected code and none of the dialogue means what it seems to. In something of a casting coup, the performer assigned to try to make some sense of these irreconcilable narratives is Jodelle Ferland, the *Tideland* star whom Gilliam singled out not wholly whimsically as the best actor he'd ever directed. But it's an impossible gig.

The other problem is the steamroller momentum of the films themselves as a brand. As the films become their own phenomenon as vehicles for the merchandising of icons, they increasingly suck all the fun from the books. Bella loses all the sparkle and spunkiness that make her an attractive, and at times even plausible, heroine on the page; while the witty and appealing Jacob, Bella's bantering rival as narrator, is reduced to a set of wolfy abs and shiny teeth. At least Robert Pattinson is a lot better in this instalment, for reasons not clearly apparent, but the recasting of Rachele Lefevre's iconic villain from the first two films with the starker but much less effective Bryce Dallas Howard is a murky and rather discreditable-looking affair, and has done the film no favours at all: Lefevre was, along with Ashley Greene's Alice, one of the series' real finds, whereas Howard (who reportedly was offered the part at the start of the franchise but turned it down as not being big enough for a star of her magnitude) battles a professional history of deeply unscary wetness. Exactly who or what is eclipsed remains, as it always was, a mystery; and the book's rather effective use of expansive novelistic flashbacks translates particularly badly to film, docking the ending from Jasper's secret history of the American south as a battleground of vampire armies, and leaving it unclear why the Third Wife was a third wife at all. And yet, as with its predecessors, there's still some residual sense in the film of what makes the books haunting and evocative distillations of adolescence: in this particular instalment, the simultaneous imminence of graduation, sex, college, and the loss of childhood for a new and untried life as the adult it's not at all clear you should want to be. Particularly if you've read *Breaking Dawn*.



Going to college is similarly a dark rite of death and reawakening in **Toy Story 3**, where Woody, Buzz, and the now slimmed-down gang become the deeply sentient embodiment of the childhood Andy has to put behind as he leaves the chrysalis of the family home on his own irreversible journey into adulthood, albeit this time without the immortal undead sparkly thing. It starts with a big kick of its own, where we're plucked out of the huge opening action set piece in a *Cars 2* trailer landscape to find it was all a game

within Andy's imagination (so much we expected) within a video from ten years in the past (poignant heartstring-strumming twist!). Astonishingly manipulative even by recent Disney•Pixar standards, it packages a homily about endings, letting go, and the circle of shelf-life around a much darker and genuinely upsetting film about social abandonment and institutional brutality, as the gang find themselves mistakenly donated to Sunnyside Daycare, "a sad, lonely place full of washed-up old toys who have no owners ... a place of ruin

and despair" under the thuggish regime of a non-brand toy despot and his similarly damaged henchpeople, and at the daily mercy of unparented tots who treat collectively-owned toys with energetic disdain. All evil in the film is the result of real or perceived abandonment: "You want your mommy back? She never loved you! Don't be such a baby!" We don't need a secret decoder ring to get the message that the relationship of one-to-one ownership between a child and a toy, and between a parent and a child, is the only non-traumatising way; that socialised care is nightmarishly destructive, and the only true love is the reciprocated love of the purchaser for the purchased or, failing that, of the adoptive owner for the treasure freely given by both itself and its former family. Imagine what your toys, what your *childhood*, thinks about you leaving them behind. No wonder the dreadful milked ending has the peculiar effect it does on some adults. My party of six were all stonily dry-eyed, but then like the adorable Bonnie we've already proven our incorruptible goodness through the pure purchased love of a plush Totoro. Mind you, the shop where we bought them went out of business.



The most dangerous game is the quarry of **Predators**, another franchise end-and-beginning, with its origins in a Robert Rodriguez script that was old when the first *Toy Story* was young, but remodelled now in the aftermath of DC's *Aliens* versus *Predator* mythos to take the action extrasolar, the Predators themselves into a

speciated hierarchy, and the narrative closer to the characteristically knowing game architecture of Paul W.S. Anderson's *AvP* films: "This planet is a game preserve – and we're the game!" And so it proves as, in a replay of Anderson's *Resident Evil* opening, the characters wake up (here literally) parachuted into the game environment

with no previous acquaintance and having to work out the rules as they go, only slightly assisted by Topher Grace's geeky Dr Game Hints, who may however have a predatory agenda of his own. For like layers of dream or gameplay, a whole hierarchy of predation now unfolds, with four species of *Predator* now assembled into a pyramid of their own, and their earthly prey a hand-picked cast of human predators who on Earth would be the hunters. (As throughout, Alice Braga's character offers on-screen signing for the slower viewer: "We're predators too. It's because we're the *monsters of our world*.") But it's ultimately just a toy story, and the real game is preying on us; the new *Predators* are named – Classic, Berserker, Tracker, Falconer – like action-figure collectables, which of course is exactly what they are. And their lifecycle is that of film franchise sequels: "The larger ones hunt the smaller ones. They hunt seasonally, always in threes. It's like evolution: they try to make themselves into better killers." And at the end, when all but the fittest have been weeded out, a new bunch of players comes tumbling out of the sky, and the game begins again.



Manmade evolution takes a nasty turn as *Predators* lead Adrien Brody pumps down and geeks up for Vincenzo Natali's **Splice**, in which the Canadian sf mini-maestro behind *Cube* and *Cypher* makes an offering at the shrine of his nation's treasure with a homage-to-Cronenberg gene-squirmer about a Mr & Mrs Frankenstein couple

who manage to engineer, deliver, and raise an *Eraserhead* baby in their employer's lab without anyone particularly noticing. Like one of *Inception*'s inner dreams, the lifecycle of this baby of wrong is accelerated to fit within the film, as it grows rapidly from hi-tech IVF bloblet to an animatronic man-baby-chicken thing

that thrashes around knocking over those towers of instrument trays geneticists like to have around the lab, to a child actress who creepily watches daddy boffing mommy, to a digitally mutated adult performer hot for various kinds of grossly dysfunctional familial action, and then to the final twist form that demonstrates why you absolutely shouldn't fish for dropped torches in dark deep ponds with a long stick just the right length to pull you in by. Each stage of this complex narrative ontogeny is punctuated by a beat of Scheintod before the beast comes back to life as the next act of its story cycle, in a series of increasingly daft twists each one of which is visible from space to everyone but the characters. Joel Silver and Guillermo del Toro are among the credited producers, and you pretty much know what kind of offspring they're going to engineer. But it does what it's coded to, with one of those vital presentations to shareholders scheduled at the start of the film that you just know is going to end in blood, protoplasm, and shards of glass.



For a more traditional family film there's **Cats and Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore**, a belated 3D sequel to the 2001 shaggy spy spoof about a secret organisation of canine agents united against a SMERSH of sinister moggies. The original *Cats and Dogs* had the bad timing to limp out of the catflap behind Rodriguez' first *Spy Kids*, now assumed sufficiently prior to the target audience's recorded history for its tagline to be opportunistically repurposed: "Just like real spies, only furrier!" Neil Patrick Harris and Nick Nolte take over the characters previously voiced by Tobey Maguire and Alec Baldwin, who presumably no longer need the money thanks to developments in their own professional accreditation in the nine years between; and the original film's witty and plausible premise that dogs

are good and cats are evil has been toned down, or as we like to say re-visioned, to appease the cat-person audience with the new revelation that cats have had their own covert agency for homeland security all along under the leadership of "Tab Lazenby" (in tribute to Christopher Nolan's favourite Bond), and it's only a few rogue elements ("radical feline influence") that are bent on satellite-based genocide and holding the world to ransom. Original villain Mr Tinkles makes an intermittently amusing cameo in a *Silence of the Lambs* spoof, but Bette Midler's Kitty Galore is actually a new character, so in what sense the film constitutes her revenge is one of those puzzles that probably transmits outside the frequency of the human brain. As in *Toy Story 3*, there's an interesting darker strand about what happens to unwanted pets, discussed discreetly in code ("There's only one place for a mad dog: the kennels!") for the benefit of young viewers who don't yet know what really happened to Barfy when Jesus came to take him for an extra-special walkies. But the whole thing is impossibly outclassed by the accompanying Looney Tunes short, which opens with Wile E. Coyote unboxing an Acme package labelled BUNGEE CORD in glorious 3D, and from that point pretty much storyboards itself.



Kitty's hand-me-down plot, the bungling trainee hero who learns mastery from the mistakes of overconfidence, regresses through its own past lives in **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**: the surface layer in a chain of remakes of remakes reaching all the way back to Lucian, the primal dreamer and mitochondrial Adam of sf, whose original tall-story-within-a-story has been subsequently filtered through the successive layers of Goethe, Dukas, and *Fantasia* before somehow ending up as a Jerry Bruckheimer production about matter-bending immortal Arthurians chucking plasma bolts at one another in present-day NYU. A wiggled-out and trenchcoated Nic Cage explains how it's done: "Sorcerers can manipulate matter

because they're born with the ability to use their entire brains. Everything is in a state of vibration. *See the molecules! Make them vibrate faster!*" The story's own stratified genesis is mirrored in the disarmingly toylike villainy structure, which goes deeper into the story's past and higher up the pyramid of evil nemeses by opening successive layers of a Russian doll of bad

guys within which they've been trapped in sequence over the ages, culminating in the final kick of original bad girl Alice Krige's climactic release in the body of Monica Bellucci, an evil sorceress inside a hot one. Fortunately this version lives in a world where physics nerds with a face like Jay Baruchel can impress the cute blonde goy by showing her his Tesla coil, to the point

where she's his to command ("I need you to climb up the tower [sc. of jeopardy] and realign the transmitter" [of ending; *Kitty Galore* does this too]), and where comedically acquired mop skills turn out to be just what's needed to save the day and become the "prime Merlinian" foretold in the musty books of lore with their lavish full-page fantasy art illustrations.



More or less the same plot is reincarnated again, but this time as something genuinely new and strange, in the season's other remake, M. Night Shyamalan's epic folly **The Last Airbender**: an insane 103-minute live-action condensation of the huge narrative arc of the first of the Nickelodeon *Avatar* anime's three seasons, intended as the first of a trilogy retracing the labyrinthine quest of matter-bending boy lama Aang and his chums around an epic fantasy world ethnopolicised around the four Empedoclean elements. Defying near-universal derision from critics unable to see past the stilted plot, dialogue, and performances and the dodgy 3D retrofit, it's managed to do quite acceptable business in the US, if probably just short of enough to get the sequels made. But it's certainly true that the narrative style is, ahem, unconventional, even by its director's own increasingly weird and woeful standard of quirkiness. The original series was a bold and well-received attempt at a homegrown American anime, with a Sino-Japanese fantasy setting, martial-arts mashup action style, and sprawling mystico-gibberish daemonology; and Shyamalan's wildly unorthodox adaptation starts from the mad ambition to represent the seven and a half hours of TV storyline as faithfully as

possible, whatever the carnage to normal filmic values.

The effect is of a sprawling epic fantasy novel series wound with massive coils of storyline whose narrative coherence remains always hauntingly out of reach. Vast narrative elisions are spanned with rickety rope bridges of retro-exposition or swung acrobatically across on vines of voiceover; dialogue from omitted scenes is dubbed on top of entirely different ones; great slabs of backstory break off and fall on you like collapsing ice cliffs. ("You are a great strategist, I won't deny you that. Your failure in the siege of Bar-Sing-Se won't be held against you. Your son died in that campaign, didn't he?") Dev Patel's conflicted princeling, who at one point has to prompt a passing child to narrate his history for him, is encountered going over his character notes aloud; and sometimes even the bizarre dialogue seems to be in conversation with itself: "As you know, I conducted a raid on the great library, which most say does not exist." – "Get on with it!" To break the monotony of conventional action sequences, we have characters perform slow acts of meditative prancing in gorgeous fantasy landscapes, including a climactic Helm's Deep sequence where the hero greets the news of imminent attack with the

unexpected words "Is there a spiritual place where I can meditate? ... Some of the monks can meditate for up to four days." The ding-dong over the ethnicity of the leads all seems a bit misplaced, given that nobody kicked up much fuss about the same characters' being voiced by Caucasian actors in the TV show, and the supporting cast are actually fairly consistently non-western – as are the settings, designs, and landscapes, with some spectacularly beautiful Tarsemesque second unit. It's a bit more of a problem that none of the lead trio are terribly good, but they're no worse than the *Harry Potter* gang in their early days, and you can see room for growth. It is, in fact, exactly the same kind of film as *Inception*: colossally expensive, fundamentally inept in all kinds of ways, and seemingly doomed to dismissal, yet completely sure of itself and its unlikeness to anything else, and able to strike a mysterious lost chord with audiences that better-trained ears can't hear. Of course it's completely humourless and irony-free, which was probably the only way to do it; but it's by far the most adventurous and enjoyable film Shyamalan has made, and the most truly dreamlike film of the season, with a grasp on conventional film narrative that seems shakier and shakier till the final kick, and it really *was* a kitten, after all. **Nick Lowe**

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